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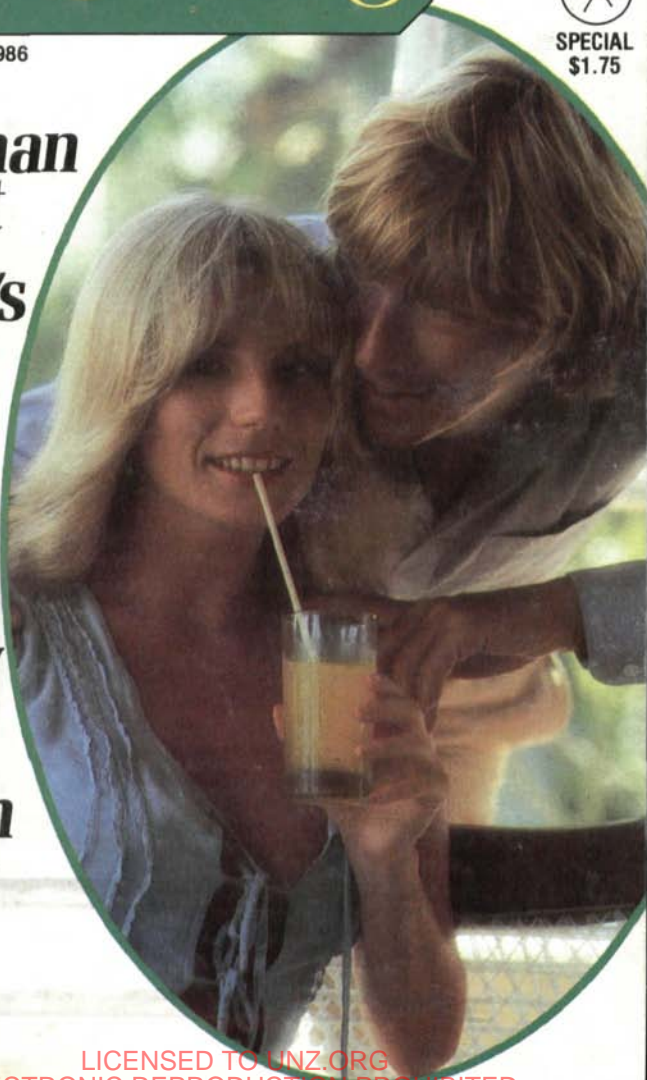
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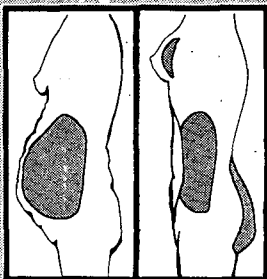
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# 5 Great Romances

MARCH/APRIL 1986 • VOLUME 3 NO. 1

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# COUNTRY MUSIC

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*A woman can spend half a lifetime paying for an impulsive marriage at seventeen. Dawna Logan's husband, a feckless rodeo rider, is hardly ever at home. Now, at forty, she's sure she's not interested in love—when a handsome Texas rancher bursts into her life.*

---

NANCY BACON

---

Dawna Logan sat at one end of the long, crushed-leather sofa, curled into a tiny ball, her toes tucked beneath the hem of her lush blue-velvet robe. She held a cigarette in one hand, a cocktail in the other, and gazed moodily through the sliding-glass doors at the gray afternoon sky.

She took long swallows of her drink. She, who never drank, who hated the taste of liquor, wanted to get totally bombed tonight and go to bed without thinking.

Without wondering where all the dreams had gone, where her youth had gone. She was forty years old today, and the realization stunned her. She still felt seventeen inside herself, beneath her skin, in her heart, soul, and brain. Who, then, was this forty-year-old woman who stared back at her from every mirror in the room?

She was alone, at a crossroads in her life. Wasn't that what all the women's magazines called it? Or "the middle-aged

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crisis"? Maybe if there *was* a crisis of some kind, it would be easier to deal with, but this mundane sameness was driving her crazy. The battle for success had been fought and won. She had succeeded in rising above the poverty of her early years, had worked hard to get out of the shabby southwest side of town and into this lovely modern home in The Bluffs. She had seen her modest sewing business flourish into the number one tailoring shop in Cheyenne. Why, then, was she so restless, so unfulfilled? She had everything she had ever wanted in life—didn't she?

A half hour later Dawna sat down to eat her lonely dinner, feeling just a little sorry for herself. She wished now she had accepted her best friend Daisy's invitation to have dinner with her and her husband, Bud, instead of fibbing and telling her that she was spending her birthday with her parents. But she hadn't felt like being around anyone earlier. She had wanted to be alone with her thoughts, and now the booze had betrayed her, and her thoughts were overpowering her, taking her back to a time and place that she thought she had successfully buried. She hadn't thought about her marriage in years—she hadn't had a marriage in years. God, why hadn't someone stopped her, tried to talk her out of marrying a feckless rodeo bum whom she had known not at all?

Dawna had met Tank Logan at a rodeo when she was 17. Overwhelmed by this dark, sturdy, handsome man who had awakened her sexuality, she had married him a few weeks later, when they were still virtually strangers. She had been swept away by his passionate attentions and the chance to escape from the drudgery of helping to support and care for her seven younger brothers and sisters.

But she soon found she had thrown away her youth and traded one set of bad circumstances for another twice as bad.

She remembered with a shudder the series of cheap motels in which she had spent the first few months of her marriage, when they weren't bedding down in the sleeper of Tank's big diesel rig, the greasy-spoon restaurants, and boring, monotonous hours on an endless highway.

The marriage had been over before it began, she thought, pushing away her plate and lighting a cigarette. She had met Tank in July and married him in September; three months later, she was pregnant, and the honeymoon was over. He had taken her back to Cheyenne, rented a little two-bedroom house in a tract in the southwest side of town, kissed her good-bye, and was back on the road again before her head had cleared. What had happened? She was right back where she started, and all in less than six months' time. A prisoner, once again, of hard work and poverty, with a son, Jimmy, to raise and a husband who was hardly ever around, Dawna eventually began to take in sewing to make ends meet.

That had been a lifetime ago, Dawna thought, living in that tacky little clapboard house, dreaming of someday moving to The Bluffs and rubbing elbows with the wealthy, of having her own tailoring business, of being *somebody*. Well, she was somebody now. She had the most successful tailoring business in Cheyenne, Wyoming, she had her dream house in the exclusive section of town, The Bluffs, and her son Jimmy was in a fine college in Laramie. But no marriage, she reflected bitterly. That had ended long ago.

She was relieved that Tank wasn't home—wished he would never come home again. He had retired from trucking five and half years ago and had been underfoot ever since, driving her crazy with just his presence. Too old to follow the rodeo circuit, he was now content to hang out at the local taverns, swapping

stories with the good ole boys about the way it used to be. When he wasn't bar-hopping he could be found at the local rodeo grounds, the Moose Club, or the Post 400 American Legion Hall. He and Dawna seldom met, except on holidays or at family gatherings, which suited her just fine. She had long since given up waiting for him. He had asked her if she would like to go out for dinner on her birthday, but she had declined. She knew there was a pool tournament at the Legion Hall that Tank wanted very much to attend. Besides, she had really wanted to be alone.

She sipped another drink, finally feeling the effect of the vodka, feeling fuzzy and floaty and almost happy. Being forty years old wasn't the end of the world. Besides, wasn't a woman supposed to be at her sexual peak at forty? She giggled, thinking, *If only I had someone to peak with!* She rose from the dinner table and steadied herself as best she could, weaving her way slowly across the thick carpet toward the hall that led to her bedroom, singing softly under her breath, "Happy birthday to me..."

The next week Dawna sat hunched over her sewing machine putting the last row of rickrack around the hem of the skirt she was making for Barbi something or other, one of the little dancers who performed on the Frontier Days midway with a country and western band.

The telephone rang, and Dawna called over her shoulder, "Get that, will you Wendy?" before she remembered that she had given her assistant the afternoon off.

She ran for the telephone and answered curtly.

"Hey, Dawna, how's my cutie?" a male voice asked.

"Hi, Fred," she said, smiling at the sound of Fred Tanner's booming, jovial

voice. He was a big shot with the North American Association of Rodeos and had been hiring her for the past ten years to make the posse's shirts for the parade.

"Hey, sugar, I need a big, big favor," Fred said. "How busy are you today?"

"Not busy at all, thank God. I'm going to close early today. Why?"

"A friend of mine just in from Texas needs a little alteration on his pants—Dusty Denbow. You know him, don't you?"

"I've heard the name."

"He was All-Around Champ a few years back, remember? Held the title for six consecutive years and was one of the top winners in arena earnings. He's going to award the trophy and purse this year at the rodeo."

Fred laughed and spoke to someone, his hand over the mouthpiece, and Dawna heard a muffled chorus of masculine laughter and comments. Dusty Denbow, she remembered now. He had been a big rodeo star back in the fifties. She had read someplace that he now owned a huge cattle ranch in Texas, and she had seen his picture gracing the pages of her western-wear magazines, endorsing boots, hats, and other western apparel. He was attractive, as far as she remembered. She had long ago given up mooning over men in magazines and books.

"Yes, I remember, Fred. So what's the problem with his pants?"

"Hell, he's been trying to figure that out for years!" He roared with laughter, repeating everything to whomever was with him, and Dawna felt her impatience growing. Obviously, the "good ole boys" had started celebrating Frontier Days a little early. She listened to the muted laughter and conversation a moment longer and was just ready to hang up when a deep, softly accented voice said, "Hello, Dawna? This is Dusty Denbow. Please excuse Fred. Some of the boys stopped in

with a bottle of bourbon, and, well—" A soft, intimate chuckle. "You know how that goes. I'd really appreciate it if you could find the time to fix my pants—they just need to be taken in a couple of inches."

"Well, I was just getting ready to close for the day." She hesitated, wanting to refuse, yet conditioned by all those years when she couldn't afford to turn any job away. "What exactly needs to be done to them?"

"Well, ma'am, they're a little loose around the hips, and they need to be hemmed. You see, my secretary picked up the suit for me—I'm supposed to wear it tomorrow night at the big shindig here in town, I guess—and I didn't have time to try it on and see if everything fit."

"Well—" She glanced at her watch. Two-thirty. It wouldn't take long to fix the pants, and he was a friend of Fred's, after all, and a guest of the rodeo board. "All right, Mr. Denbow, you can come on out, and I'll see what I can do."

A few minutes later, she heard a car pull into the driveway and looked out to see a new chocolate-brown Mercedes-Benz purr to a halt beneath the oak tree. She caught her breath when Dusty Denbow stepped out of the gleaming automobile and looked directly at her, his eyes locking with hers through the screen on the window.

She opened the screen door before he could knock, and he touched the brim of his beautiful Stetson and flashed a shy grin. "Afternoon, ma'am. I really appreciate your staying open for me. I know you must want to get started on Frontier Days with everyone else."

"No, not really." She stood aside to let him enter and felt her heart flutter with the oddest feeling. "But I do have dinner plans, and I'd like to get out of here early for once. I'm trying to take a four day weekend."

"I'm sorry if I've spoiled your afternoon." He stood towering over her, dwarfing her, the paper bag clutched in both his hands as he stared at her. He knew he should take off his hat, shake her hand, but he was powerless to do so. It was her. My God, after all these years, it was *her*!

"Oh, no problem. It'll just take a minute to fix your trousers." She felt lightheaded, giddy, and had the strangest impulse to giggle. She indicated a dressing room. "You can change in there." She turned swiftly away and went to pour herself a cup of coffee. Goodness, he had looked at her so—so strangely, almost into her, it seemed. And he was almost indecently handsome. Blue, blue eyes, so dark they almost appeared purple, and long thick lashes that must be the envy of every woman he knew. His nose was straight and well-shaped, his mouth full and used to smiling, and there were twin dimples high up in his cheeks even when his face was in repose. He wore a moustache, and his hair was dark and curly from what she could see beneath his hat. He must be six feet or over, and he wore tight Levi's and a western shirt open at the throat with a sexy tuft of chest hair peeking out. She heard the dressing-room door open and took a hasty gulp of coffee, almost scalding her mouth, and wondered why she was behaving like such a fool. She had seen handsome cowboys before—plenty of them—and she had flirted with them and perhaps wondered what it would be like to kiss them, but there her fantasies ended. She had no desire to *ever* become intimate with *any* man again. One in any woman's lifetime was more than enough.

"Say, that coffee smells good. You don't suppose I could bum a cup, do you?" He walked toward her, the legs of his trousers flapping down around his boots and dragging on the floor. He held



them up with one hand and grinned at her.

"Oh! Of course." She poured him a cup of coffee. "Do you take cream or sugar?"

"No, ma'am, just black, please." His fingers touched hers when he took the cup, and she flinched, jerking her hand back.

"Well, let's see about these pants." She walked around him, taking a pinch of fabric between her fingers and pulling it taut over his hips. It was beautiful fabric, fawn colored and silky to the touch, and she knew it was very expensive. She reached for her tailor's chalk and marked new seam lines on both hips and down the center seam in back. "All right—fine. Now if you'll just step up here, please, I'll measure the length." She indicated a chair, and he dutifully complied, balancing his coffee cup in one hand, holding up his trousers with the other. "Let's see—I think just about a half an inch on either side here—" She stooped over to pinch up a little of the loose fabric between his thighs and felt her face flush crimson. Gosh, what was wrong with her? She'd measured hundreds, thousands of men's inseams over the years. She made quick, deft slashes with her marking chalk and turned to the table for her pincushion.

He was speaking, his voice soft, slow, and warm, the Texas accent very apparent and very charming. He explained that he had known Fred Tanner for years but this was the first time he'd been at Cheyenne Frontier Days as a spectator and guest rather than a contestant. "And I gotta admit, I'm looking forward to being on *this* side of the fence for a change!"

"I know what you mean," Dawna said around the mouthful of pins. "I used to ride bulls when I was a girl." She turned up the hem and pinned it in place.

"That couldn't have been too long ago. You don't look much more than a girl

now."

"It was a hundred years ago," she said flatly, moving to the other side and turning up the hem. His boots were alligator and very beautifully made, with silver wing tips on the toes. "There—that should do it." She stood, busying herself at the table with her back to him. "You can change now."

Dusty went into the dressing room, shucked off the pants, and pulled on his Levi's, frowning as he buckled his belt. It had to be her. The face was almost identical to the one he had kept alive in his memory for over twenty years. He had only to think about that day so long ago at the Ellensburg Rodeo in Washington for it all to become crystal clear again. He hadn't been much more than a kid himself in those days; in fact, it had been only his second season on the rodeo circuit. It had been the bull-riding event, and he had drawn "old double aught, the meanest Brahma to come down the pike" and had been promptly thrown three seconds into the ride. Old Double O had twisted and bellowed in demented rage, going for the punk cowboy who had dared to ride him, his massive head lowered, his lethal-looking hoofs pawing up the dust of the arena as he charged. Dusty had been unable to move, either from terror or the pain of his twisted ankle. He didn't know, didn't have time to think; he only knew that he was going to die and his mother was hundreds of miles away in Texas.

Then, out of nowhere, it seemed, a diminutive, red-haired girl had appeared, yelling at the top of her lungs and waving her arms to attract the bull's attention. She had scooped up a red cape and thrown it into the Brahma's face, then turned and sprinted across the arena with old Double O in hot pursuit. Dusty had seen her vault over the fence, helped by several cowboys; then he, too, was surrounded by cowboys and half carried,

half dragged back to the chutes. He had hobbled over to thank her and had been struck speechless by her beauty. Her freckled face was dirt smudged and sweaty, the long, incredibly red hair wild and wind-blown about her shoulders, and she had come up just barely to his own shoulder. A tiny curvaceous figure was encased in faded Levi's and snug western shirt, and her breasts were heaving with the effort of her dash across the arena. He had finally stammered out a thank you and had stood staring, devouring her feature by feature, etching forever her face in his memory. She had laughed modestly and said something about having just happened to be there, and besides, she could run faster than all those stove-up old cowboys who were keeping the fence warm.

"What's your name?" he had blurted just as a big, bearlike cowboy had appeared to lead her away. He had asked around and discovered that she was married to the darkly handsome cowboy and that they were on their honeymoon. He remembered thinking that if *he* had been married to her, he sure as hell wouldn't be spending his honeymoon at a rodeo!

Could it possibly be her? The flaming red hair had darkened to a shimmering copper mahogany, and the trim figure seemed less voluptuous, more streamlined and slender, but the big brown eyes looked the same, as far as he could remember. The girl at the Ellensburg Rodeo had been literally covered with freckles, but Dawna didn't have any, or none that he had noticed. Jesus, he had to find out if it was the same person. He had been in love with her for over twenty years and had long ago come to the conclusion that he must be crazy for thinking about a girl he had seen only fleetingly and had never actually talked with. But she had made such a stunning impact on him that he had never forgotten her, had always waited for

someone like her to come into his life.

He scooped up his dress pants and turned the doorknob. It couldn't be her. But, Christ, this woman looked enough like her to be her twin.

"Here, I'll take those and get started." Dawna took his pants and smiled up at him. "Would you like me to warm up your coffee? This shouldn't take long; you're welcome to wait if you'd like." She indicated the sofa near the door. "There's magazines there on the coffee table if you'd like to read."

"Thanks." He perched on the arm of the sofa and held out his cup for a refill. "I'll just chat with you if it won't disturb you."

"Uh, no, of course not." She filled his cup and hurried back to the safety of her sewing machine. Why did she feel she would be safer across the room from him?

"Have you lived in Cheyenne long?"

"All my life." She ripped open the side seams of the trousers and basted the new seams together with pins.

He watched her for a few minutes, then asked casually, "You said you used to ride bulls—where? I mean, just around here, or did you ever compete in other rodeos?"

"No, just here in Cheyenne."

His heart fell, and he stared at her shiny head, bent now over her machine, at the nape of her neck, from which she had lifted her hair and pinned it up for coolness. There was a smattering of beige freckles barely discernible beneath her light make-up, and his heart soared again. It *had* to be her. Older, yes, but even more beautiful than he remembered. Unconsciously, he held his breath when he asked, "Did you ever get around to any of the other rodeos just as a spectator—the Calgary Stampede, the Portland Round-up or the Ellensburg Rodeo?"

She turned toward him and pulled a mock-weary face. "God, *yes!* All of

them!" She laughed lightly. "My husband used to do a lot of rodeoing when we were first married, so I guess I've hit just about every arena from here to Canada!"

"You don't sound like you enjoyed it much."

"Eating dust and smelling manure is not exactly my idea of a fun way to spend the afternoon."

"What is your idea of a fun afternoon?"

"What?" She stopped sewing and looked at him.

"Well, if you don't enjoy rodeos, what is your idea of a fun afternoon? What do you do instead of eating dust and smelling manure?"

"Gee, I don't know. Isn't that funny? No one's ever asked me that before." She looked squarely at him for a moment, her wide brown eyes searching his face; then she shrugged and went back to her sewing. "I don't know—I guess I'd just putter around the house and garden, read, you know..."

"Sounds exciting as hell." He laughed and tightened his hands around the coffee mug, forcing himself to play it cool and casual. It was her; he knew it now. If she had traveled the rodeo circuit with her husband, it *had* to be her! But where was he now? There was no sign of a man around the place and only one car in the driveway with the license plates DAWNA. Maybe they were divorced, but how to ask her without offending her? He stood and wandered casually across the large room, glancing idly at pattern books and sketches. "I know what you mean about dusty arenas," he said, pausing a few feet from her and leaning against the table. "I spent over a dozen years on the circuit myself and must have swallowed a peck of dirt, but it's hard to get that old sawdust out of your blood. Once you've been bitten by the rodeo bug, you've got the disease for life."

"I know what *you* mean." Dawna laughed. "My dad still has the bug, and he hasn't been on a bronc in over twenty-five years. But during Frontier Days he and Tank go to the rodeo every day and sit on the fence and tell each other how great they used to be."

"Tank?" Dusty watched her face and noticed the closing of it, the remote iciness when she answered.

"Yes, Tank Logan, my husband." Then she lowered her head to her sewing, and the machine whirled into motion again.

"Oh, yeah, Tank Logan. Sure, I remember him. He used to be a pretty fair cowboy—" She glanced up, and their eyes met, and they both knew he was lying. Tank had never been a winner.

"There—all finished, Mr. Denbow." She held out his trousers and stood, a smile trembling on her lips. Why did this stranger upset her so? Why did he seem familiar and not a stranger at all?

"Thanks, I really appreciate your taking the time to fix them for me. How much do I owe you?" His mind searched frantically for something else to say, anything to delay his departure. She told him what he owed, and he paid, moving slowly and reluctantly toward the door. "Well, thanks again, Dawna—may I call you Dawna?" He kept his hat in his hands and smiled his most engaging smile.

"Well—sure—" What difference did it make? she thought. She'd never see him again.

"And, please, call me Dusty." Again the charming, boyish grin. "I keep thinking my father's in the room when you say 'Mr. Denbow.'" She smiled and held the screen door open for him. "Say, are you going to the big shindig tomorrow night? Maybe I'll see you there, huh?"

"Uh, yes, I usually go to the kickoff dinner." She felt flustered, as if he were asking her for a date, although God knew

she had no idea what it felt like to be asked for a date. "I—I'm going with friends, Fred knows them—the Bud Retamals."

"Hey, I know old Bud! I met him last year in Denver when I was there looking at some stock. Small world, huh?" He silently cursed himself for sounding like an idiot.

"Yes, I suppose it is. Well, good-by, Mr. Denbow. It was nice meeting you."

"Dusty." He shook her hand warmly, gazing directly and deeply into her eyes.

"Dusty," she murmured faintly, drawn to the intensity of his gaze. His eyes were so blue...

"Well, thanks again." He still held her hand but made a move toward the doorway. "I'll see you tomorrow night, then."

"Yes—uh, well, good-by, then." She gently removed her hand from his and watched him start toward his car, turn and flash that dimpled smile that made her want to smile in return. He waved, and she quickly shut the screen and hurried out of his view. Her hands were shaking when she poured herself a cup of coffee, and she felt warm and flushed. Maybe she was coming down with a summer cold...

The next night Dawna checked her reflection in the full-length mirror on her bathroom door, turning sideways to look critically at the high slit in her emerald-green skirt. Was it too high? Too sexy? She had seen it that morning in the window of Fowler's, the most exclusive women's store in Cheyenne, and on impulse had gone in and bought it. Now she wasn't so sure it was right. It looked so sexy, and she wasn't the sexy type—or so she had always believed. Well, it was too late now. Daisy and Bud would be here any minute to pick her up for the big kickoff dinner that would officially start Frontier Days. She clipped on thin gold

earrings and pushed back her shoulder-length red hair to show them off.

"Hey, honey, where's my new shirt? The blue one." Tank walked into her bedroom and stopped still, staring, then emitted a long, low wolf whistle. "Jesus, you look terrific, honey. Is that a new dress?" He was bare-chested, and his beer belly hung over his belt, completely obscuring the large silver buckle.

"Oh! Tank, you startled me." She spun to face him, a little surprised as she always was to see a man in her bedroom. She still hadn't adjusted to having Tank home most of the time.

"I'm sorry, but the door was open." He shrugged apologetically, long since resigned to the fact that his wife needed and demanded privacy. They hadn't shared a bedroom in six years, and he knew to always knock before entering hers.

"Oh, that's okay. I'm ready." She scooped up a gossamer-thin shawl and walked briskly out the door, Tank trailing after her.

"Have you seen my new shirt, honey? I've looked everywhere."

"It should be in your closet." She moved purposefully down the hallway to his bedroom and opened his closet door. "I told Quina to wash and iron it." She withdrew the shirt and handed it to him, her gaze sweeping his half-nude body. God, he looked so *old*, she realized suddenly. At seventeen years her senior, he was now fifty-seven, and he had not aged well. Booze and late nights had given him an unhealthy look. She shuddered involuntarily and turned quickly toward the door.

"What's the matter honey?" Tank slipped into the shirt dropping his pants to tuck in the shirt tail, and Dawna saw his thin, almost hairless legs, the sparse growth on his chest that was now as white as the hair on his head.



"Nothing." A wave of pity washed over her, and she said, "Are you sure you won't come with us tonight?"

"Naw, I hate those banquet things." He hitched up his pants, sucking in his stomach until he had buckled his belt, then let it fall again, and the belt buckle disappeared from sight. "I can hear old Fred anytime. I'm meeting Cliff and your dad at the Mayflower Tavern. Why don't you come along with us?" Even as he asked, he knew she wouldn't go. Dawna hated bars and had never, to his knowledge, been inside one.

"You know I can't, Tank. Everyone expects me at the kickoff dinner." She fiddled with her earrings, wanting to leave but for some strange reason feeling sorry for him tonight. Was it because she had suddenly realized how old he was? How alone? She heard Bud's car pull into the driveway and took a deep breath of relief. "There they are—see you later." And she was off before he could try to kiss her good night.

Later Dawna sat next to Daisy and Bud at the long horseshoe-shaped banquet table, her eyes shifting to the door every few minutes. She paid scant attention to Fred Tanner as he gave his annual speech about Frontier Days and the spirit of Cheyenne's citizens. She was watching for Dusty Benbow, although she would not have admitted it to anyone. She had thought of little else since yesterday afternoon but was embarrassed to confide her feelings even to Daisy. She was a married woman, and married women did not lust after sexy cowboys. She wondered how old he was. He had a sprinkling of gray at his temples, and his tanned youthful face was lightly lined, but the flesh was still firm and taut. Not like Tank, with his sagging skin and booze-bloated pouches beneath the eyes. She couldn't help making a mental comparison of the two men and again felt that guilty tug of pity for Tank.

Why? When she hadn't thought about him one way or the other for years.

Fred sat down to a round of applause and whistles; then white-coated waiters briskly served champagne and canapes. The customary roast beef dinner would be served promptly at eight-thirty; then there would be dancing and more drinking in the bar. She sipped her champagne, half listening to Daisy gushing about some new incident in her daughter Annie's life. The kids had bought a little place not far from the Retamal ranch and were already planning a family, much to Daisy's delight. A tall, elegantly booted and Stetsoned cowboy entered and stood at the door, his gaze moving about the room. He wore a fawn-colored western suit that showed off his wide shoulders and slim hips to perfection, and his cream-colored shirt was open at the throat. Dawna caught her breath; it was *him*.

Dusty Denbow saw her at the same moment, and a smile started forming as he made his way across the crowded room. He stopped by her side and leaned down to say hello, his smile broadening and his deep-blue eyes moving appreciatively over her body in the clinging green-silk gown. He shook Bud's hand, kissed Daisy's cheek, made all the proper greetings and comments, then sat down in the empty chair next to Dawna. "You look beautiful tonight," he said softly, and she was acutely aware of the husky tremor in his voice.

"Thank you." She actually blushed. "So do you. I mean, the suit looks wonderful on you."

"I have a wonderful tailor." Their eyes met and held until Dawna, flustered, looked away.

"Hey, Dusty," Bud said, leaning in front of Daisy to get Dusty's attention. "Fred tells me you're in the market for a good Hereford bull. Come on out to the ranch tomorrow and I'll show you a little

three-year-old that's prime stock." The two men fell to discussing the merits of Herefords versus Black Angus, and Dawna moved her chair back a little and closer to Daisy's, away from Dusty. Goodness, the man had such an unsettling effect on her! She deliberately turned her attention to Daisy and her enthusiastic account of a new dress she had just bought. Bud liked to say of his wife, "She never met a dress she didn't like."

Dinner was served, and conversation became livelier, the men having switched from champagne to bourbon, and Dawna sat slightly apart from the group, watching Dusty. He was so good-looking it was difficult *not* to watch him, but it was more than that; he was charming, witty, amusingly self-deprecating about his prowess as All-Around Rodeo Champ, and genuinely modest about his success as a rancher. All the men that Dawna knew were such blow-hards that they couldn't wait to toot their own horns, but Dusty seemed embarrassed by the attention and strove to change the subject. The band began tuning up in the far corner, and almost before they struck the first note, Dusty was on his feet and pulling Dawna up with him.

He led her on to the empty dance floor and sighed. "God, I wish people wouldn't do that. It's embarrassing as hell."

"What? Being told how wonderful you are?" Dawna was surprised at how easily she fit against him, how perfectly she followed his lead.

"I was 'wonderful' fifteen years ago." He grinned, squeezing her hand. "Now I'm just an old Texas cowpoke trying to make a living."

"And a darn good one from what I hear." Dawna laughed, surprising herself by returning the squeeze. "According to Bud, you own at least half of Texas."

"Lady, if I owned half of Texas, I sure as hell wouldn't be here!" He spun her

around, drawing her closer to his body, his hand pressed firm and warm against the small of her back.

"Where would you be?" Her voice came out breathless and huskier than normal.

"I'd be lying on the beach in Bora-Bora, watching the sunset and drinking coconut rum."

"What, no dark-skinned native girls feeding you peeled grapes?" Dawna teased.

"Uh-uh—I prefer fair-skinned Irish lasses with red hair." His lips brushed against her cheek as he spoke, and he felt a quiver race through her body. It was all he could do to keep from kissing her. He had forced himself to talk with the other men at the table, ignoring Dawna for fear that he would blurt out something stupid. He had thought of nothing else since yesterday afternoon and had questioned Fred Tanner about her to the point of arousing his suspicions.

"So, you kinda like that little red-headed gal, huh, boy?" Fred had boomed good-naturedly. "Well, stand in line, fella. Half the men in town would like to leave their shoes under her bed and have tried, too, from what I hear. But that little gal's straight arrow—no foolin' around that I know of." He had then gone on to tell Dusty about Tank Logan and what half the town knew; the marriage did not seem to be a happy one. The news had elated Dusty, and he had spent most of the day wondering how he could get Dawna alone.

Other couples began drifting on to the dance floor, and Dawna still felt the heat in her face. Why was she behaving like such a ninny? Countless men had complimented her in the past, and she had brushed aside their pretty words without a second thought. But Dusty's compliments sounded so sincere, so almost chaste that they flustered her and attracted her at the

same time. She was wearily familiar with the suggestive tone used by most men and was surprised to find it missing from Dusty's softly accented voice. And his eyes were clear and open; they did not strip naked as so many men's did. She liked his easy manner, his engaging smile, his apparent brightness, and wanted very much to get to know him better. She would have every opportunity that she wanted to be with him, she knew, because as a guest of Fred Tanner's he would be at every function that she had been invited to. But should she go, knowing he'd be there, knowing the way he made her feel?

"Have you known the Retamals long?" Dusty asked, pulling a little away to look down into her face.

"Yes, all my life. I went to school with Daisy, and I met Bud when I was about seventeen or eighteen, I guess. They're like my own family." She smiled up at him, into his blue, blue eyes, and felt a thrill streak up her spine and back again. She wondered what he would do if she suddenly kissed him full upon the mouth and laughed a little at the very idea. "I thought for a while that Daisy was going to be my sister-in-law," she said, "She used to date my brother Cliff before she met Bud."

"They seem like real nice people. I'm looking forward to seeing their ranch tomorrow. I understand it's quite a spread." He felt her breasts moving against his chest as they danced. Heat flooded his groin, and he gripped her tighter.

"Ye—yes," she breathed, holding him tighter as well, feeling her heartbeat quicken against his. "It's the largest Hereford ranch in Cheyenne. It's really beautiful—the—the house and grounds and—" He pressed his lips against her temple, and a pulse started beating there.

"Hey, why don't you take a ride out with me tomorrow—show me the way?"

He squeezed her hand and drew away to grin down at her. "I'm a stranger in town, ma'am. You wouldn't want me getting lost, now would you?"

Her voice grew suddenly faint. "No, I wouldn't want that." She stared, mesmerized, into his beautiful blue eyes, and everyone in the vast banquet room disappeared from her vision.

"You'll go with me? Great!" He laughed, and dimples flashed. "I'll pick you up at noon. We'll have lunch first, okay?"

He squeezed her hand, bringing her out of her trance. What did he mean? She hadn't said she'd go with him. "Uh, no, I can't—"

Damn it. He'd moved too fast. Why hadn't he just been satisfied with her going to the ranch as his guide? "We'll skip lunch, then," he said quickly, cheerfully. "I'll pick you up about, say, two o'clock? Does that sound all right?"

"Oh, I didn't mean lunch. I mean—" She stammered in confusion, wanting to say yes, hating to remember that she was married. "You know I'm married. What would Daisy and Bud think if I came out with you?" She tried to draw away from his intoxicating closeness, but he held her firmly, warmly, against him.

"They'd think you were being neighborly to a poor old Texas boy," he said, grinning. "I don't know my way around the big city."

"You could call Bud for directions, you know." She laughed at the mock-innocence of his expression.

"Gee, why didn't I think of that," he drawled like a dumb country boy, and she laughed again, moving closer against him. "Okay, if you think it'll tarnish your reputation to be seen at the Retamal ranch with me, how about just lunch? I can meet Bud later on in the afternoon."

"Oh, thank you. I'd love to, really, but I can't—"

"Why not?"

"Well, I—" Now what? she thought frantically. The "I'm married" bit didn't seem to faze him, and he apparently saw no harm in lunching with a married woman he'd met a scant twenty-four hours ago.

"Come on now. Don't tell me you're working because you already told me you were taking a four-day weekend."

"Yes, I did, didn't I?" She suddenly felt ridiculous and prim and old-fashioned. These were the 1980s for heaven's sake, and men and women often lunched together without one being ravished by the other. God, he must think her an awful square, but she never had lunch alone with a man unless he was a relative or business associate. It seemed unbelievable even to her.

"So let's have lunch. You can tell me about the fascinating spots in Cheyenne that I should visit while I'm here." He could sense her wavering and smiled his most charming smile, looking directly into her eyes and squeezing her hand for added emphasis. "You can start by telling me the best place to have lunch." She laughed and he knew he had her. "What time shall I pick you up? Noon? One? Two?"

"Okay, you win. How about one o'clock? I can meet you in town and save you a trip out to my place." *And avoid any chance of your running into Tank*, she thought, wondering why on earth she was agreeing to this madness.

"Great. I'm staying at Holdings Little America Hotel, room two ten."

"I'll meet you in the lobby," she said quickly, probably too quickly, then felt like a fool when she saw his raised eyebrow.

"Right, the lobby it is." For one idiotic moment, he wanted to holler "Yahoo!" and throw his Stetson in the air as they always do in western movies, but he

wasn't wearing his Stetson, and Dawna would probably faint from mortification. He had never met anyone even remotely like her. She was so reserved and old-fashioned, it was like a breath of fresh, clean air. A bachelor at forty-two, Dusty had had his share (and some men said, *their* share!) of women over the years and had never found one he wanted to spend any time with, much less the rest of his life. They always seemed so grasping, so eager for a relationship that they had killed it before it had had a chance to begin. Every woman that he had been even vaguely interested in had fallen eagerly into his bed and contrived to stay there. To find a woman who was embarrassed to even have lunch with him was a novelty in itself. He wanted to know everything about her, and having to act with decorum was killing him. He wanted to take her out of this crowded, noisy place and sit under a tree somewhere and just talk to her, get to know her. The band ended the song, and Dawna started to move away, toward the table, but Dusty held her hands, pulling her back. "Let's dance the next one," he said, not wanting to release her just yet.

"Oh, I can't." She glanced furtively about, then laughed a little at herself. "It would be all over town tomorrow morning that I had danced *two dances in a row* with that 'strange cowboy from Texas!'"

"That's more intriguing than dancing with that familiar cowboy from Cheyenne, don't you think?" He laughed and drew her back into his arms before she could protest further. "Relax—I promise not to sully your good name."

"Now you're making fun of me." But she nestled back into his arms as if she belonged there. "I know you must think I'm an awful square, but, well—" She shrugged and laughed lightly. "Well, I guess I am."

"I've suddenly developed this burning



interest in squares," he murmured, and whirled her around and around, taking her breath away and causing her to laugh and hold him tighter. He loved to hear her laugh. It was so musical, so tinkling, like tossing a handful of silver bells into the air. And he got the feeling that she didn't laugh all that often; it was too fresh, too bright, too wondering, as if her vocal chords had just discovered a new, delicious feeling.

"Dusty, please—stop!" She laughed, clinging to him, her red hair flying about her flushed face, her eyes sparkling like brown diamonds. "You're making me dizzy!"

He slowed his pace to a sedate fox trot but kept her snuggled tight against him so he could feel every contour of her body from chest to knee.

"Whew, that's better," she said, still laughing. "I'm too old for that sort of thing. Give me a nice slow waltz anytime."

"Me, too, I'm ashamed to admit. I know it blows my 'swinging bachelor' image, but I just never could get the hang of those fast dances."

"We'd better sit this one out, then." He kept ahold of her hand as they wended their way through the crowd and back to their table, and Dawna noticed several friends glance first at her, then at Dusty, then at their clasped hands, then swiftly back to her again, surprise flashing in their eyes. She tried to shake his hand loose, but he merely tightened his fingers and gave her an impudent grin.

Daisy stared at her with open curiosity when they took their seats and leaned over to whisper, "What's going on here?"

"Nothing," Dawna hissed under her breath. She kept her eyes down, knowing that everyone at the table was staring at her and wondering how well she knew Dusty Denbow. That was the trouble with a small town; everyone knew everyone

else's business—and what they didn't know they made it their duty to find out.

"Come on, kid, let's go to the sandbox," Daisy said, adding in a whisper, "I want to talk to you!" They made their way to the ladies' room, pausing to greet acquaintances along the way. Once inside, Daisy grabbed Dawna's arm and said, "Okay, girl, tell me what's going on in that little red head of yours. Jeez, I thought you guys were going to start making it right there on the dance floor!"

"Daisy! That's not true!" Dawna blushed crimson, genuinely shocked.

"Hey, kid, it's *me*, old Daze. Remember? You can tell me anything."

"There's nothing to tell. We were just laughing, kidding around, you know." Dawna moved to one of the mirrors and checked her reflection, her too-pink cheeks, her shiny eyes—her guilty expression.

"Oh, no, you don't, Dawna Regina!" Daisy followed her, laughing. "You can fool some of the people some of the time, et cetera, but you can't fool *me*! I saw the way you two were looking at each other—like laser beams!"

"What a charming way you have with words." Dawna giggled, then sobered suddenly and asked, "Oh, gosh, Daze, did anyone else at the table notice?"

"Just the ones who were looking." Daisy threw her a sassy grin, and Dawna groaned. "Don't worry, kid. In less than an hour, they'll all be so drunk they won't even remember if you were *here* tonight." She took her compact, lipstick, and comb from her evening bag and began freshening her makeup.

"I hope so." Dawna combed her hair and applied fresh lipstick, waiting for the inevitable question.

"You kinda like Mr. Denbow of Dallas, Texas, don't ya, kid?"

Dawna feigned boredom. "Umm, he's all right, I guess."

"Pretty damned all right, I'd say, from the way you were looking at him! God, kid, I haven't seen that look on your face in twenty years."

"You were certainly keeping a good eye on me, weren't you?"

"Why not?" Daisy laughed. "It was the best show in the room. I made a bet with myself that he was going to kiss you before the dance ended, and he did, too!"

"He did not!"

"He did. Right there, on the side of your head. I saw him."

"I didn't notice."

"Like hell you didn't!"

"Actually," Dawna giggled, "he kissed me twice!"

"See?" Daisy laughed. "I knew it. Hey—what's wrong with a little innocent flirtation—he's just going to be here for Frontier Days, isn't he? I mean, it isn't like you're going to run away from home just because you're attracted to the guy—are you?"

Dawna laughed. "No—hardly. But I don't want to give him the wrong idea, either. I mean, I don't want him to think that I—well, you know, that—"

"That you'd go to bed with him?" She looked at her incredulously. "Honestly, Dawna, sometimes you truly amaze me. Do you mean you wouldn't go to bed with him simply because of what he might think of you? I don't believe it! This is the first time in *years* you've been even remotely interested in a man, and you're coming on like a prim little virgin. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"God, Daisy, you don't expect me to just leap into bed with a man after one dance with him, do you?"

"No, I'd wait until you get to his hotel room."

"And how do I check in—as Madam X? I know every desk clerk at Little America—"

"Ah-ha! He already told you where

he's staying, huh?" Daisy's eyes danced with humor, and she couldn't help laughing at her friend's guilty expression. "Okay, kid, fess up. And I want *all* the juicy details!" She leaned forward eagerly as Dawna recounted Dusty's invitation to lunch and his suggestion that she guide him out to the Retamal ranch.

"I can just imagine what Bud would think if I showed up with Dusty tomorrow."

"He'd be tickled pink—we both would. God, kid, if you knew how I've worried about you over the years, praying you'd find somebody and be as happy as I am with Bud. You haven't been happy with Tank for years, and I've always wondered why you stayed with him."

"Just habit, I guess. I've spent over half my life with him."

"Then it's high time you spent the next half with someone who makes *you* happy for a change." Her voice grew firm. "You are having lunch with Dusty Denbow tomorrow, *and* you are coming out to the ranch with him. I won't hear another word about it. God, kid, you've got to get out once in a while and play! All you do is work and worry. Just relax for once in your life, will ya? Let go and enjoy yourself. Who knows? You might like it."

"I feel so silly. Like I'm going on a date or something. I won't know how to act."

"You were doing pretty good on the dance floor, kid." Daisy laughed. "Hey, just relax and let it flow. You'll be fine. Just be yourself."

"Okay, mommie," Dawna mimicked in a tiny voice, then laughed and hugged her. "Gosh, I feel like a girl going on her first date."

"You are, in a way. Do you realize that? You went straight from your parent's house to that awful little place in the southwest side, remember?"

"I've been trying to forget for years."

"And this is your chance, kid! You can

have two glorious weeks with that sexy Texas hunk, and when it's over, well—" She grinned and shrugged. "You'll have beautiful memories to think about while you're standing in line to cash your social security checks!"

Dawna laughed. "You make it sound so simple, so breezy."

"It is. Don't you read *Cosmopolitan*?" She blotted her lips, gave her hair a final pat, and looped her arm through Dawna's. "Okay, then it's all set. After lunch, you guys come out to the ranch and we'll have drinks."

"You forgot to tell me where I'm having lunch." Dawna laughed, allowing herself to be led docilely toward the door.

"I think—Little Bear Inn." Daisy opened the door, and they stepped out into the melee of merrymakers. "Yes, that's perfect. The Little Bear Inn. It's quiet and cozy and romantic—"

Daisy's words were swallowed up by the din of the crowd and the amplified music, but Dawna was no longer listening. Her eyes sought her place at the long, horseshoe-shaped table and saw Dusty, his chair turned slightly toward the floor, watching for her. Their gazes locked and held as she moved toward him. She licked her dry lips and felt her heart beating in rhythm with each step that drew her closer to those intense blue eyes.

Later, Dawna would see that interlude between July seventeenth and August fourth in a haze of muted color and sound, a pastel passage of time that was almost achingly sweet. But while it was happening, it was vivid, acute, dazzling—every emotion, sound and color in sharp focus. Dusty showed her a side of herself that she had never seen before. Under his gentle questioning, his easy, teasing manner, he had drawn her out, and she had emerged as a woman of substance, a bright, amusing, knowledgeable

woman—as well as a desirable one.

They had gone to Little Bear Inn for lunch, and Dawna had sat stiffly, her knees pressed together, her hands folded demurely on the table, while Dusty had lounged comfortably on his side of the booth. She had been surprised at how difficult it was merely to carry on a simple conversation with a man and had spent the first half hour stammering and blushing. She was used to talking with men, of course, but they had always done most of the talking and then mostly about themselves and what interested them. Dusty asked her questions about herself and seemed genuinely interested in the answers, interested in *her*. It was a heady experience, and she didn't quite know how to handle it. She felt herself relaxing, unwinding, and, to her surprise, that little annoying tug of anxiety had completely vanished.

She learned that he had never married, was forty-two years old and an Aquarian, like herself. He lived alone in his sprawling ranch-style house in Dallas, Texas, with a live-in cook and a housekeeper and kept a staff of twenty cowboys on the payroll year round to tend to his cattle and do the chores. His parents, both in their late seventies, lived on the ranch in a guest house, and his two older brothers, both married, lived nearby on ranches of their own.

They lingered at the restaurant until late afternoon, then drove to Bud and Daisy's ranch. After the men had taken care of their business, Bud and Daisy proposed that the four of them go out together to a concert of country music that evening.

When, finally, in the wee hours of the morning, they parted, Dusty and Dawna were making plans for a picnic at the state park the next day.

That morning they drove west on Happy Jack Road toward the mountains that

loomed majestically in the distance. It was a beautiful, sun-filled day, made to order for picnics and boating. A placid river meandered through a lush meadow ablaze with wild flowers, and they followed it into the foothills, neither of them speaking. They had no need for words; their eyes said it all when they turned to look at one another.

They found a parking space and, hand in hand, walked into the woods. They jumped over a narrow, rushing stream white with foam and laughed for no reason at all. Dusty stooped to pick a handful of violets and presented them to Dawna with a sweeping, courtly bow. She plucked a bluebell from the side of the stream and tucked it behind his ear. Laughing, they continued through the forest of blue spruce and Alpine fir until they came to a small clearing surrounded by cottonwood and aspen.

"Let's eat here," Dawna said, "by the beaver pond. It's so peaceful and pretty." Willow thickets grew profusely along the bank and alder, dwarf birch, and hawthorn competed for space with the shadbush and sagebrush. Their pungent odors mingled together, and Dawna stood still for a moment, breathing deeply, eyes closed. She felt Dusty approach from behind, and then his arms slipped around her, drawing her against him.

"It's almost like an aphrodisiac, isn't it?" he murmured against her hair, and she nodded happily, turning in his arms to face him.

He stood holding her by the shoulders, his dark-blue eyes growing darker still as he gazed down at her. She was so tiny her head could have fitted easily beneath his chin, but he resisted the urge to nestle it there. He sighed inaudibly and released her. "Come on—help me spread out the blanket."

Dawna's mouth was suddenly dry, and she was acutely aware of how quiet it was,

how alone they were. She sat down on the far corner of the blanket and opened the picnic hamper for the wineglasses. The loud pop of the cork sounded like a gunshot in the stillness, and she jumped a foot, almost dropping the glasses.

"Hurry"—Dusty laughed—"before it goes over." And she held the glasses out for him to fill with the sparkling, foamy red wine.

He touched his glass rim to hers. "What shall we drink to?"

"How about blue skies and wild flowers?"

"And green meadows and beautiful redheads..." His intense blue gaze held hers until she, slightly flustered, lowered her eyes and took a small sip of the bubbly wine.

"Hey, something in that basket sure smells good. Let's see what we've got here." He drew the hamper closer and lifted the lid. "Good God, woman"—he chuckled—"there's enough in here to feed a Little League team! How long did you plan on keeping me in these woods anyway?"

Forever, she wanted to say. "I haven't decided yet. I'll let you know." She drank again, emptying the glass, and held it out toward him for a refill. Instead, he took the glass from her hand and set it on a nearby rock, then held her hand in both of his.

His voice was as soft as the gentle breeze that caressed their faces. "Thank you for coming with me today."

"I wanted to—very much."

"I'm glad."

They sat cross-legged, staring at one another for a long moment, hands still clasped. Dawna licked her dry lips, and her smile was as faint as her voice when she asked, "Shall I put out the lunch? Are you hungry?"

*For you, he thought. I'm damnably hungry for you!* "Umm, not just yet.



Let's have another glass of Cold Duck, and you can tell me your life story."

She laughed, accepting the glass he filled and handed to her. "I thought I had already told you my life story. It only takes about ten minutes!"

"A woman without a past. How charming!" He stretched out on his side, his tight Levi's clearly outlining his long legs and muscled thighs. And Dawna's gaze was drawn as if by a magnet to the bulge where they joined. She had never in her entire life wondered what a man would look like naked, but she wondered about Dusty Denbow.

Dusty gazed at her for a long moment, then asked softly, "Where would you go if you could travel anywhere in the world?"

"Oh, gee, I don't know. I've never really thought about it. I guess just anywhere outside of Wyoming. I'd kind of like to see what a real big city looks like. You know, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York—"

"You'd hate the big cities." He smiled, and dimples danced in his cheeks. "Except Dallas—you'd love Dallas."

"Would I, now?" She grinned back at him playfully.

"Uh-huh, I guarantee it."

"And just what would I find so fascinating in Dallas?"

"Me." He reached for her, and she tumbled willingly, eagerly into his arms. "Dawna"—he sighed—"Dawna—"

He kissed her, and she stopped speaking and clung to him for a long breathless moment. "God, I'm sorry, honey," he whispered against her mouth. "But damn it! I can't help myself when you're close like this." He took her by the shoulders, facing her fully, dark eyes boring into hers. "Dawna, you must know how I feel—Jesus, I love you! I'm in love with you, honey, and there's no turning back. I've waited for you all my life, and when I found you, when I saw you that day I

brought my pants over, I felt like I'd been kicked in the belly by a Kentucky mule!"

"Oh, Dusty, don't!"

"Why? For God's sake, why? There has to be a chance for us! I know you don't love your husband. I know your life's been miserable—"

"You seem to 'know' an awful lot about me for a man who just saw me for the first time two days ago." She tried to make her voice firm, but it wavered into a whisper.

"Darling Dawna, I've known you for twenty-two years and nine months."

Her brown eyes searched his face, a face so suddenly dear and familiar that she felt she had always known it. "You don't mean that—literally."

"I do. Literally. Twenty-two years and nine months ago in September of 1957, Labor Day weekend, to be exact, you saved my life." He smiled at her astonished expression. "It's true. I was at the Ellensburg Rodeo in Washington state. It was the bull-riding event, and I had drawn old Double-O, the meanest Brahma to come down the pike—" He laughed and hugged her close. "It's funny, but I've never forgotten that old bull's name—or his reputation! He threw me two seconds out of the chute and was ready to do a tap dance on my chest, when *you* dropped out of heaven, a gorgeous redheaded angel..." He kissed her temple and ran his free hand through her shiny curls, then held her close as he related the rest of the story. "Do you remember? That *was* you, wasn't it? I've held a picture of you in my mind all these years."

"Yes! I do remember!" She turned and stared at him, amazed. "My God, that seems like a hundred years ago. Why on earth have you remembered it all this time?"

"Because I fell in love with you that day, and I never could get you out of my head."

"But—but how could you be in love with someone you'd only seen once in your life?"

He shrugged and grinned. "I don't know—I just am."

She shook her head, returning his smile, unable to resist his charm. "I don't believe this. *No one* would believe this."

"That's what makes it so special."

"And so sad. Oh, Dusty, I wish now I'd never met you. It's too late for—"

"No! Don't ever let me hear you say that! It's *not* too late. Good God, Dawna, this is not the middle ages. Divorce is perfectly legal and respectable these days."

Her expression went perfectly blank for a moment; then her eyes widened, and her mouth spread into a broad grin. "Yes, it is, isn't it? *I could* divorce Tank. God knows there's been no real marriage for years. It's just that—that—"

"He's comfortable? Familiar? You're used to having him around the house? Oh, sweetheart, I want you to get used to having *me* around the house!"

He caught her in his arms and she fell forward, her mouth seeking his, her hands moving in his thick, dark hair, and he kissed her until they were both shaken and gasping for air. "God, I love you, Dawna. I love you!"

"And I love you, my darling." She clung to him, burying her face in the sweetness of his neck.

"Say you'll marry me." He kissed her until she felt faint. "Say it. Say yes, my darling."

"Dusty, I—I can't. Please— You're pushing me too fast. How can you expect me to say I'll marry you when I don't even know you?" Her eyes searched for his understanding.

"You're right—you're absolutely right, honey. Forgive me." He kissed her hands, and his grin was boyish and contrite. "I didn't mean to bring this up to-

day, believe me, I didn't, but being here alone with you, well, it just suddenly seemed so senseless to be talking about trees and squirrels when what I really wanted to say was how much I love you."

"I appreciate that Dusty, but you have to give me a little space. I'm not used to being cornered like this." She smiled shyly and returned the pressure on her fingers. "Give me a little time to absorb this—this situation. Okay?"

"Okay. Not another word about marriage. I promise." He drew her against his chest and wrapped his arms lovingly around her.

She shook her head in mock-exasperation. "Let's eat before I throw you in the creek to cool you off."

"Yes, ma'am." Then they were laughing together, heads close, hands still clasped. "But can I just say one more thing?"

"What?"

"I love you."

It was dark by the time they drove back to town. They had tramped through the woods after lunch, Dawna doing her "tour guide" number on the points of interest; then they had rented a boat at Granite Lake and just drifted lazily until dusk. Talking about everything under the sun. Learning about one another. Discovering things in common that delighted and amazed them. Each seeing the other's character take shape, become three-dimensional. Talking. Teasing. Laughing. Falling in love.

"Are you as hungry as I am?"

"I'm ravenous!"

"Good." He grinned down at her, and his handsome face was even more handsome in the red glow of neon street lights. "Let's have a bite of supper before I take you home."

"Oh, Dusty, I'm such a mess." She glanced down at her rolled-up jeans, her

dirty bare feet.

"We can stop by my place and get cleaned up."

He cut across two lanes of traffic, squealed through the intersection, and turned left toward Holdings Little America Hotel. The parking attendant leapt forward to take the Mercedes, and Dusty pressed a twenty-dollar bill into his hand. "Give it a quick wash, will ya, son? Nothing fancy—just get off the topsoil, okay?"

The boy eyed the twenty. "Yes, *sir*! Thank you, *sir*!"

"Are you always that generous?" Dawna asked as he ushered her inside the hotel.

"Nope. Only when I'm taking my favorite girl out to dinner." He kept his hand on her elbow as he escorted her across the lobby toward the elevators, and she kept her eyes straight ahead and slightly lowered, praying she wouldn't see anyone she knew. "Okay, you can look now," he teased when the elevator doors had closed behind them.

"I guess I'm not very good at this—" She smiled up at him. "What do the country singers call it—'out slippin' around'?"

"Don't worry. If you see anyone you know, I'll just tell them that you're going to my room to fix my pants."

"Perfect. No one would suspect a thing if you explained it like that!" When they got off the elevator, he unlocked his door, and held it for her. "Oh, Dusty, what a beautiful room! I had no idea they were this nice."

Double louvered doors led into a small dressing room with the bathroom just beyond, and she closed both doors firmly after tossing Dusty a sassy grin over her shoulder.

When she re-entered the suite, soft music was playing and the lights were turned down low. Dusty was seated in an easy chair, waiting for her.

"Let's dance." Dusty stood, drawing her up and into his arms, and then they were moving slowly, sensually to the music, their bodies finding the same thoughtful rhythm, melding together. They danced for long moments without speaking; then he lowered his head and kissed her lightly, questioningly. Her parted lips and sharp intake of breath caused him to groan aloud and pull her closer still, and they swayed back and forth, mouths feeding quietly, hungrily.

Dawna felt the edge of the bed against the back of her knees and wondered briefly how she'd gotten there; then she wondered about nothing but the wonder of Dusty. His kisses. His hands. His hard, warm body pressing her back, back—She tried to protest, murmuring his name, and he shushed her with another long, passionate kiss. She heard her name whispered against her ear; then his hands were on her breasts. She knew she should tell him to stop, but she was powerless to do so. God, it felt so *good*! She wanted it to go on and on, this wondrous new feeling, this delicious freeing of her emotions, her desire.

She let his hands explore her freely, first removing her clothes, then his own. When they finally united, she cried his name, sighed it, moaned it, and her body answered with an abandonment that thrilled her. It had been so long since she had made love without tensing up, without wishing it was over before it started. But now, with Dusty, she died with eagerness, with anticipation. Her body trembled and shook, and her arms clung, her hands exploring his wonderfully warm body. Suddenly she forgot about dinner, about her marriage, about everything. So *this* was what all the shouting was about? So this was love...

It was Tuesday evening, and they were in Dusty's room again after having spent

the afternoon touring the museums and some of the special events that were offered during Frontier Days. Dusty had not raised the question of Tank even though Dawna knew it had been on his mind all day. They had spent three days together almost continuously, with Dawna slipping out of his bed at the first sign of dawn and driving home before her housekeeper arrived for the day. Thankfully Tank had rarely been home himself, the last days, traveling the rodeo circuit as usual, checking in at the house so infrequently that he didn't even notice Dawna's absences.

When she was alone, Dawna was plagued with the most dreadful feelings of guilt and despair, but when she was with Dusty, she was lifted on the wings of love to some shining, enchanted place where nothing could ever hurt her. They had known one another six days; six magic, love-filled days that had seemed more like dreams than reality.

Although Dawna felt it was too soon to consider marriage to Dusty, she had promised to talk to Tank about a divorce. And she agreed to consider the possibility of going back to Texas with Dusty for a short visit, although she also warned him that she might not be able to manage it.

Now she looked over at him, her face softening with love as it always did when she looked at him. "I have some bad news and some good news, darling," she told him. "Which do you want to hear first?"

"I always like to to get the bad out of the way first so I can fully enjoy the good."

"Okay." She took a deep breath. "I saw Tank this morning, but I didn't have a chance to talk to him about the divorce." She saw the sudden hurt look in his beautiful blue eyes and hastened to explain. "But he's leaving town again tomorrow. He's going rodeoing with my brother Cliff and his son, Tod. They'll be

gone for the whole month of August. I'm sorry, darling. I know I should have told him. But it's going to come as such a shock to him—he's bound to take it badly—and—and I don't want any bad feelings hanging over us for these last few days. You understand, don't you, sweetheart?"

"Of course I do, and I love you for it." His eyes were smiling again.

"I have some good news for you, too," she said at length. "I can go to Texas with you—if you still want me to."

"You're kidding." His face lit up with happiness, and he grabbed her and kissed her. "Hey, that's great! What changed your mind?"

"Dusty, let me finish." She laughed. "I *would* like to make it a sort of business trip. I could look around a few of the stores, pick up some new ideas, maybe even buy a few bolts of fabric. They must have so many different types there, in such a big city." She was so used to all work and no play that she couldn't conceive of going someplace just for the fun of it.

"That's a great idea, honey. Mom'll be thrilled to have someone to drag around town, and believe me, she knows every store in Dallas! I wouldn't be any help at all, I'm afraid. I've never been in a women's store in my life." He popped a caviar-covered cracker into his mouth and took a sip of bourbon.

"Have I told you in the last five minutes that I'm crazy about you?" Dawna beamed.

"Nope."

"I'm crazy about you, Mr. Denbow."

"Not only are you beautiful, but you have excellent taste in men!"

"And you're not only handsome, you're modest as well!"

"I would say we're a matched set, wouldn't you?"

"Definitely."

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes." She'd never said the words aloud before, and for a moment she was stunned that she had, even though in the back of her mind and deep in her heart she'd dreamed of being his wife since that first afternoon she'd met him.

"I'm going to hold you to that," he said softly, reaching for her. She went eagerly into his arms for his kiss, and it seemed to seal the bargain.

"I love you very, very much, Dusty." She said it almost solemnly and was surprised to see him throw back his head and give a great shout of laughter.

"Yahoo! Did you hear that, Lord? She loves me! She's gonna marry me!" He leapt to his feet, pulling her up with him, lifting her completely off the floor and swinging her around and around. "I'm the happiest, luckiest man in the whole world!"

She laughed and clung to him, her head spinning, her heart thumping. *No*, she thought, *I'm the happiest and luckiest woman in the whole world*. To be given another chance at love so late in life was surely a gift from heaven, and she was almost afraid to hold it too tightly lest it break and fall apart.

In the end, their departure had been almost sinfully easy. With Tank out of town, she had no worries at all. As they circled overhead awaiting landing clearance, Dawna leaned over to peer out the window. What a beautiful city! His home. Soon to be her home. It made her feel funny, thinking that; her home had always been Cheyenne, her own home designed by her own hand.

Dusty's house, at the end of a mile-long lane bordered by wild roses, was splendid, opulent, fabulous. Beamed ceilings rose forty-five feet overhead with two massive crystal chandeliers placed at either end of a living room that seemed to be the size of

a football field. Everywhere she looked, she saw antiques, and her head spun with the richness of it all. Gosh, just how wealthy was this Texas cowboy she'd fallen in love with?

Dusty took her sightseeing everywhere, to the Southfork Ranch used in the *Dallas* television series to the famous (some said infamous) Gilley's, home of the mechanical bull. Gosh, how times had changed! If she had gone out in public dressed the way today's young girls did, her father would have whipped her with the leather quirt, and her mother would have made her say at least a hundred Hail Mary's! And today's cowboys were a different breed than the cowboys of her day. Then it had been a gambler's life, a gypsy life that promised no future and very little present. Today's rodeo cowboy was an athlete who took winning very seriously; it was his livelihood.

Dusty had been shrewd indeed, she'd learned, by turning his phenomenal World All-Around Champion winnings into wise investments and high-paying endorsements. His beef-producing cattle ranch was one of the largest in Dallas, and he had holdings in oil and real estate as well. Not a bad catch for a freckle-faced redhead from Cheyenne! Dawna couldn't help feeling smug. She'd never in her life felt so cherished, so warm, so *whole*. Everything they did together was special and wonderful.

The week that she had planned on staying stretched into two and then into three, and she had to force herself to remember her responsibilities back home in Cheyenne. Tank would be home in a week or so; Jimmy would be checking in for a few days before the fall semester in Laramie; her assistant Wendy would be leaving on vacation the first week in October, and she would have to face reality again. She would have to end her marriage and her life as she had known it for twenty-three

years. It was exciting and scary, and she longed to get on with it—and to put it off just a little longer. Gosh, how was she going to tell Tank, anyway? And Jimmy? How would he take it?

"He probably couldn't care less as long as he gets his monthly allowance," Dawna told Dusty on their last evening together. "He's a cold one, that kid, and I've never really understood it. He's had all the love and care that I could give him, and if I didn't have that much time when he was growing up, there was always his grandparents and countless cousins, so he didn't want for a home life or affection."

"All kids go through that, honey," Dusty said. "When they hit their teens, they suddenly think they know it all and their parents—or any adult, for that matter—are so painfully old-fashioned that they become an embarrassment, something to be avoided at all costs."

"No," Dawna frowned, "it's something more. You'll see when you meet him."

Dusty kissed her, and she tried not to think of what awaited her when she returned to Cheyenne...

Dawna arrived at the Cheyenne Municipal Airport at 10:14 A.M. and took a taxi to her home in The Bluffs. It seemed strange to be back in her old home town. She missed her new home town, Dallas, already. And Dusty—better not to think of him now. She wondered if Tank was home yet or if Jimmy had checked in. The taxi deposited her in the driveway, and she looked around curiously. There were at least five cars and vans parked around the entrance to her garage, and she did not recognize any of them. What was going on here? She opened the front door, which was standing partly open, and stepped inside, almost at once reeling back in shock. The suffocating odor of stale smoke, liquor, sex, and some other odor,

like ether, she decided, assaulted her nostrils. The huge living room was in semidarkness, all the drapes drawn against the morning sunlight, but she saw lumpy shapes scattered all about the floor, and everywhere was litter. The lumpy shapes moved, shifted, groaned, and she saw that they were sleeping bags holding young people, boys and girls sleeping together, their bare limbs flung casually over one another.

Fury raged in her as she rushed to her own room and flung open the door. Two young men and a girl lay sleeping in her beautiful bed, the lovely silk spread crumpled on the floor, a bottle of wine sitting in its own stain on her delicate white French Provincial night stand. She charged toward the bed, slapping at arms and legs at random, "Get the hell out of my room! All of you! God, who do you think you are? Get out of here at once!"

They came awake, mumbling, trying to ward off her blows. "Hey, man, cool it, huh? Jeez, man—what's happenin', huh?"

"My God, you filthy animals!" she cried, rushing from the room and down the hall, tears almost blinding her.

"Hey, what is going on? I'm trying to get some sleep, man." Jimmy walked out of his room, almost colliding with Dawna, and she grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him as if he were a rag doll.

"I want you and all this *trash* out of my house in exactly five minutes flat or I'm going to call the police." She said it hard, cold, staring him straight in the eyes, and hers did not waver; then she spun on her heel and stalked down the hallway and through the living room. "All of you—get up!" The ones who had not been awakened by the shouting now tumbled sleepily from their bedrolls, staring at her blankly. There was a mumbled chorus of "Hey, man, what's happening?"



Jimmy strolled in, barefoot, wearing jeans and pulling a T-shirt over his head. "Hey, man, party's over," he called good-naturedly. "The old lady's home—"

"Uh-oh—busted!" somebody yelled, and the room exploded with laughter.

"You've got five minutes, Jimmy." Dawna stalked angrily from the room, unmindful of whom or what she stepped on, and slammed the kitchen behind her. "Oh, my God—!" The kitchen was a total disaster. Dirty dishes, pots and pans, skillets, silverware, glasses, were everywhere. Old food lay moldering in plates and on the cabinets, and there must have been at least two dozen empty liquor bottles tossed into the wastebasket and sitting on the floor. She sank down in the pretty yellow and white breakfast nook, let her head fall forward, and cried like a baby.

Even though it was a weekend. Dawna and Wendy were in the sewing room the next day going over the unfilled orders and making a list of which ones should be filled first. Wendy told her that she had shown up for work the first week that Dawna was in Texas, but when Jimmy and his cronies had taken over the house, she had stayed away. "Good God" — Dawna sighed — "then they were here almost two whole weeks! No wonder the house was such a wreck. Damn, why couldn't Tank be home just once in his life when he's needed?" Then she flushed guiltily, remembering that she had suggested that he go with Cliff and Tod.

"When's Tank getting home?" Wendy folded and stacked several pieces of satin lining fabric, pinning the customer's name to the correct color.

"Oh, not for a week or so. Tod has to register for school on the fourteenth, so they'll probably be gone until the very last minute. You know how *men* are!"

"Yep, I do indeed," Wendy teased. "Cute little critters, ain't they?"

"Humph! That's a matter of opinion, my girl." The telephone rang, and she asked Wendy to get it.

"It's the police department," Wendy hissed, her hand over the receiver, her eyes as round as saucers. "Oh, God, Dawna, do you think it's Jimmy?"

"What? The police?" Dawna felt her heart thump and her stomach lurch sickeningly as she took the phone in a hand that had suddenly gone ice cold. "Yes, this is Dawna Logan—oh, Fred—hello! How are you?" Fred Brenner was an old friend as well as a customer, and she relaxed almost visibly.

"How's it going, Dawna? Did you survive Frontier Days all right?" They exchanged pleasantries; then Fred's voice took on a deeper quality, more serious and businesslike. "Christ, Dawna, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but we've got Jimmy down here, and it don't look too good. I'm sorry."

"Jimmy? Oh, Fred, is he all right? He isn't hurt, is he?" Her heart skipped a beat, then resumed a steady, labored beating.

"Yeah, he's okay—just higher than a kite." Fred cleared his throat, and it was obvious that it was difficult for him to explain the call. "Look, Dawna, maybe you'd better come on down here to the station, huh? We got him on possession of drugs, and—well, he had a damn mess of weapons in his car—pistols, rifles—maybe they're Tank's, huh?"

"Uh—I don't know, Fred." Her throat almost closed, it had grown so dry, and she swallowed several times. "They—they might be Tank's." But she knew they weren't. Tank had only a shotgun for duck hunting. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes, Fred—and Fred? Thank you." She knew he didn't have to call her; Jimmy was over twenty-one, legally an adult. She explained briefly to Wendy, then headed for the door, calling over her

shoulder, "Keep trying that motel number in Kittitas or Ellensburg or wherever the hell it is! And tell Tank to get his butt home *now*!" She slid behind the wheel of her Monte Carlo and broke the speed laws driving to the police department, praying every mile of the way that Jimmy hadn't done anything stupid.

Her prayers went unanswered. Fred told her they had found a fifteen-year-old girl collapsed at the fairgrounds that morning, stoned out of her mind on angel dust, and she had told them that Jimmy had made it and sold it to her. He hadn't been difficult to find. After she had thrown him out yesterday, he and his group of friends were camped up in Buford Mountain, still partying when the police had arrived. They had booked Jimmy on possession of drugs, illegal firearms, and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. They could have legally held him for seventy-two hours, but because Fred knew and liked Dawna, he had called her to come down and take her son home, releasing him on his own recognizance.

Jimmy passed out on the way home in the car. Dawna and Wendy had to carry him to bed. Once they had him settled, Wendy said "Your friend in Texas called while you were gone. He left the operator's number."

"Dusty? Oh, God!" And the tears that had been threatening all morning spilled over and coursed down her cheeks, and she sobbed aloud. And when she called and heard his soft, sweet voice over the phone, she sobbed even louder, explaining as best she could the whole ugly story.

"I'll be there this afternoon, darling," Dusty said, and she'd never heard his voice so serious, so firm. "You just sit tight, sweetheart. Don't do anything—and please try not to worry."

"Oh, Dusty, you can't come here. Not now, not with all this trouble. I don't

want you involved in it, darling. Please don't come." She drew in a shuddering breath, trying to control her crying.

"You need me. I'm coming."

"No—no—please, darling, I'll be all right now. It was just hearing your voice, and—and I've been so upset. I'm all right now that I've talked to you. Please try to understand why it wouldn't be a good idea to come here now. I'm going to talk to Tank tonight, and I'll insist that he come home and take care of this—this mess. Jimmy's always been more his son than mine." She gave a rough, bitter laugh. "They're just alike—the two of them."

"Look, darling, I don't want you going through this alone. I can catch the next flight out and be there in a couple of hours. Please let me help you, Dawna." His soft voice was pleading, love filled, and it was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do to refuse him, but she knew she must. In a town as small as Cheyenne, this whole affair would become a three-ring circus if Dusty entered the picture. No, she wouldn't have their love dragged through the mud, sullied by dirty minds.

They talked for another hour until Dawna had calmed down and was able to listen to Dusty's advice. He suggested that she should ask the judge to have Jimmy put into a maximum-security rehabilitation center where he could get treatment for his drug problem at the same time that he was serving whatever sentence they gave him. "Just don't try to talk to Jimmy or reason with him, honey," he told her. "You'll just be wasting your time. That's not your son's brain anymore. It's been taken over by chemicals. You can't talk or reason with a chemical. Remember that, sweetheart. Whatever he does or says to you isn't him any longer. It's a chemical, an insidious, creeping rot that will just continue to get worse unless you get him some good medical help. Going to jail

isn't the answer. On the contrary, it's the worst thing that could happen to him. He'll just continue to use drugs. There's damn near as much drug use in jails these days as there is on the streets. You said you know the judge—talk to him, try to get him to release Jimmy in your custody until his court date. Then you can look around, find a good drug program, and get him in it. Damn, I wish I had him here in Dallas. We've got great rehab centers for kids like him."

Dawna was hugely relieved. The thought of her son going to prison, living with hardened criminals and murderers, had been too much to bear. Dusty was right. Jimmy needed medical help, not a jail sentence. They talked for another few minutes, and Dawna promised to call him as soon as she had spoken with Tank. "I love you so very much," she whispered, and quickly replaced the receiver before she started to cry again.

Work was impossible the rest of that day. Dawna tried the motel room where Tank was staying every half hour, and the hollow ringing of the telephone filled her with rage again. Where the hell was he? When finally he answered at eleven-thirty, she tore into him furiously and was stunned to hear him laughing!

"Christ, honey, calm down. So the kid got busted and spent the night in the can. It's no big deal. Hell, every boy goes through it sooner or later. Teaches 'em to be men!" And he had laughed again, and she knew that he was drunk.

"No big deal? You stupid ass! Don't you realize how serious this is? Haven't you heard one word of what I've said? He had *guns*, Tank, illegal weapons, probably stolen. That's a felony in case you don't realize it! And he's been selling illegal drugs to *kids—to kids*, Tank!"

"Aw, he's just a kid himself. What the hell—"

"He's an adult, Tank, and of legal age

to stand trial and be sent to prison!"

"They ain't gonna send him to no prison for smoking a little pot." He laughed again. "Christ, that's about as serious as having a couple of beers these days!"

Exasperated, she ran an icy hand through her hair, shook her head, too weary to argue further. "Look, just come home, will you, please? I want you to go to Judge Winters with me—"

"Jim's home now, right?" Tank interrupted. "So? What's the rush? They won't call his case for a couple of weeks—hell, probably longer. I'll be back before that."

"Damn it, Tank, listen to me! Fred Brenner told me the arraignment will be in just a few days—"

"Aw, they always tell you that. Then it's hurry up and wait! You know how that legal crap goes. Listen, honey, I'm beat, and we have to get up early in the morning and drive three hundred miles to Calgary." He laughed good-naturedly, and she heard him take several noisy swallows; beer, no doubt, or Old Granddad whiskey. "I'll give you a call in a couple of days, see what's happenin', okay, honey? Now you stop worrying that little red head of yours, ya hear? Everything'll be all right. Ole Jim'll get out of it, you'll see."

"Damn it, Tank, I don't *want* him to get out of it!" But she was talking to the dial tone and wearily replaced the receiver. "I don't want him to get out of it this time, you blind fool," she whispered dully. "I want him to get help. Can't you understand?" But she knew even if Tank had still been listening, he wouldn't have understood.

Dawna awakened at her accustomed time of seven o'clock and went into the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee, and there sat Jimmy, showered, shaved, combed, eating a huge bowl of corn flakes

and looking as innocent as a fresh-faced college kid on his way to an early-morning class. "Hi mom," he said, giving her his most engaging smile. "How do you feel this morning?"

"I might ask you the same question." She rinsed and filled the coffeepot.

"Who, me? I feel fine. Why?" He lifted the bowl to his mouth, drinking the last dregs of milk from it.

She measured coffee into the pot and plugged it in, turning to face him. "Why, Jimmy? Are you honestly going to sit there and ask me *why* when you were so bombed out of your mind yesterday you could barely stand?"

He squirmed under her steady, hard gaze and mumbled, "Aw, so I was a little loaded—"

"A little loaded? You were practically unconscious, for God's sake!" Her voice rose in anger. "Wendy and I had to carry you to bed like a—a two-year-old! You couldn't even stand up by yourself!"

"God, mom, so I dropped a couple of downers. Those damn cops kept me up all night asking a bunch of dumb questions, taking my fingerprints and mug shots and all that crap! Jeez, they never even let me sit down once—"

"Oh you poor baby!" Her voice dripped sarcasm. "Isn't that just *dreadful*? Those mean old policeman keeping you awake like that when all you did was sell illegal, dangerous drugs to a fifteen-year-old kid!"

"I can't talk to you." He shoved away from the table and started for the door, but Dawna rushed to stand between him and escape.

"Oh, no, not so fast, young man. We've got a lot of talking to do, and you've got one hell of a lot of explaining to do! Fred Brenner said he found a whole trunkful of guns in your car. Whose are they, Jimmy? Where did you get them? And for God's sake, what are you doing

with them? What do you need them for?"

"I don't have to tell you anything." He tried to move around her, but she put both hands out, bracing them on either side of the door frame.

"I'm afraid you do unless you want to spend the next few years in prison! Damn it, Jimmy don't you realize how serious this is? I want to know where you got those guns. Are they yours?"

He shrugged. "Some of 'em. I picked 'em up here and there—around, ya know?" He sighed impatiently. "Now can I go? I gotta wash my car."

"What about the drugs? Fred said there were several Baggies of that PCP stuff."

His voice was heavy with impatience. "Okay, so I needed some extra bread."

"By selling dangerous drugs to a little kid, Jimmy? My God, what's wrong with you? Fred told me she almost died! She's still in the hospital now in case you're interested."

He shoved his face in close to hers, and his was red and angry. "Well, I'm not, see? That girl is a hard-core doper, man. She knew what she was getting. It's not my fault if she did too much and got dusted."

"But you sold it to her, Jimmy, and you made it. God how do you know you made it right? What if you did something wrong and it killed a bunch of kids?"

He actually laughed and reached out to pat her cheek. "Hell, mom, any dummy can make angel dust."

"You said it. Dummy."

His face closed again, and he shoved past her, knocking her hard against the wall. "Get out of my way. I don't have to talk to you about nothin'. If those stupid pigs wanna hassle me about this bust, I'll just get myself a lawyer. I sure as hell don't need all this goody-goody crap from you!" He stalked through the living room toward the front door.

She called after him. "How did you plan on paying your attorney fees?"

"Dad'll give me the bread."

"That'll be an interesting trick since he doesn't have any 'bread' of his own. He gets it from me, just like you do!" He shot her a sneering look, then opened the door, slamming it hard behind him.

Jimmy didn't come home that night or all the next day, and when finally he did, he was stoned and almost incoherent. She put him to bed, then lay sleepless until almost dawn, thinking, planning. She had to do something positive. She hadn't worked all these years for nothing. She was well liked and respected in Cheyenne, and if she couldn't use a little of that influence that she'd worked so hard for, what good was it?

She was on the telephone at seven the next morning, and by nine o'clock it had been settled. "Don't worry about a thing, Dawna," Judge Winters told her. "If I can't pull a couple of legal strings for my friends now and then, what's the fun of having a judicial seat? I'll just forego the hearing and sentence Jim to a maximum-security rehabilitation center—it's not as if he's a dangerous or hardened criminal." He had laughed, adding, "Besides, if I don't help you out of this, the next time you make me a suit, you'd probably sew the legs together on my britches!"

Later that afternoon Jimmy had been taken away in a police van, looking like a lost puppy in dog catcher's truck, staring through the wire at her, and she had turned away from his accusing eyes, whispering, "You'll thank me for this someday, my son. You'll see this was the only way."

After he was gone, Dawna received a call from her sister-in-law, informing her that Tank had decided to stay on the circuit for a few more weeks and wouldn't be home till mid-September. Dawna hung up the phone and thought, "Just like old

times, Tank. But this time I won't be here when you get back!"

Dawna was suddenly charged with energy and motivation. She called Daisy, and told her everything, ending with, "So I'm going to Texas, Daze! I've had it with Tank's prolonged adolescence. I'm sick to death of doing it all, earning the living, making the decisions, raising our son, holding down the fort, while Tank's out playing cowboy."

"Hallelujah!" Daisy interrupted with a shout of pure joy. "What can I do to help? What about the house and your shop?"

"Wendy can handle the shop, and when—if—Tank ever gets home, he can decide what to do about the house. I don't really care anymore. Isn't that funny? I just don't care. I worked so damn hard to buy this house, but it was never my home because there was never a family in it. I don't even like it anymore. Now when I think of home, I think of Dusty's home in Dallas. Oh, Daisy, I'm so excited—and scared! I am doing the right thing, aren't I?"

"Of course, you are, kid! God, I'm so happy for you."

"I was thinking about Tank. Do you think I'm being unfair by just leaving without talking to him?"

"Huh! When the hell do you ever get a chance to talk to him, for Christ's sake? You've been trying to talk to him for years, and he hasn't heard a word yet! Go for it, kid. Nothing's holding you here now that Jimmy's got free board and room for at least two years. You know where he's going to be, so you won't have that worry on your mind. And you can always call Tank from Texas."

"I know, I plan to. And I'll fly back and talk to him in person whenever he wants to make some decision about the house. There's really nothing else we have to discuss. I'm certainly not going to ask

for alimony or a dividing of the property. He can have it all. I'll have Dusty. I just want to take a few personal things, you know, besides my clothes. But I can always send for those later. I just want to go *now* before anything else happens!" Adrenalin shot through her body, and suddenly she wanted to move, do something, anything. She couldn't sit still another moment. "Come on over and give me a hand, Daze. Gosh, I've got so much to do!"

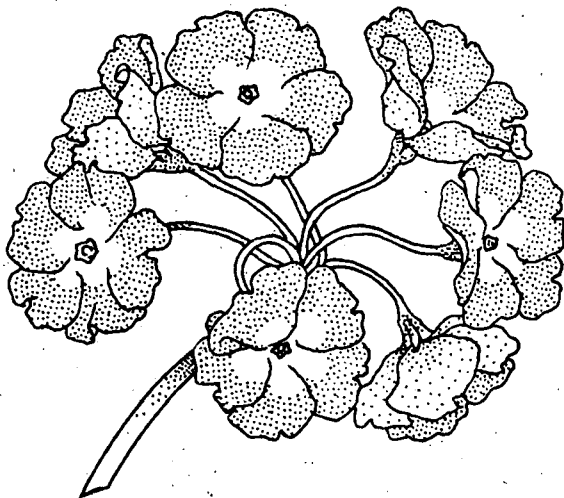
"Right, kid. Be there in five!"

Dawna poured herself a cup of coffee and walked through the large, pretty rooms of her house, looking at furniture and things as if seeing them for the first time, or perhaps the last time. *Well*, she thought, *I did it; I got my house in The Bluffs—but that's all I got.* There was really nothing in the house except furniture, carpets, drapes, and, of course, her business. But she could move her business

to Texas, her sewing machines, everything—they were transportable.

And Tank? What about him? Even if he'd never admit it, she'd acted in his best interest as well. She would free him to travel the rodeo circuit, be as irresponsible as he wanted without having anyone waiting at home, worrying and wondering. Maybe he'd even find someone to share his gypsy life with. He didn't really need Dawna. He could hire a maid to keep his clothes clean, an accountant to do his bookkeeping, a hooker to satisfy his sexual needs. After a couple of months, he probably wouldn't even miss her.

She went into the kitchen for another cup of coffee, carrying it into the living room. She picked up the telephone and dialed the number that would from now on be *her* number. Dusty answered on the first ring. "Hi, darling," she said. "I'm coming home..." ♥





# GENTLEMAN AT HEART

*When former pitcher, Jake Shepard, notorious for having decked a Yankees' manager, dubs free-spirited Alexis Celestine "Sexy Lexie," she wants to deck him. She also wants to persuade him to star in the beer commercial she hopes will launch her documentary film career. When he refuses, she employs a secret weapon he can't resist.*

ELISSA CURRY

Through the frosted glass of a small-town barbershop window, Lexie Celestine could see two men sitting side by side in the waiting room. One of them *had* to be her man.

They both looked up from their respective magazines when the little bell on the door jingled, and Lexie let herself into the brightly lit room.

The first man was wearing a three-piece

suit and a pair of silver-rimmed glasses, and was actually perusing a publication called *The Librarian*. Average height, medium build, sandy-colored hair, thirty-ish. He was, Lexie decided, not bad.

The second guy was *not* Lexie's type. He wore blue jeans, waffle-soled boots, and a functional yet woeful combination of flannel shirt and hooded sweat shirt. Unlike the first man, this one definitely

needed the haircut he was about to receive. He was also reading a magazine, but one that undoubtedly did not circulate outside all-male barber shops without a plain brown wrapper. When Lexie ker-whammed the door closed behind her, he looked her up and down and immediately assumed the automatic raised-eyebrow smirk of a skirt-chasing S.O.B.

Making a snap decision on the basis of appearance, Lexie was sure this had to be Jake Shepard. After an entire day in this hick town, she had finally tracked down the man she'd been sent to see. She took a breath and advanced. "Mr. Shepard, I presume?"

He did not get up from his relaxed position, but smiled lazily up at her. His voice was mellow but mocking. "It's not Dr. Livingston."

Eyering him frostily, she fished one of her business cards out of her coat pocket. "Mr. Shepard, my name is Alexis Celestine. I work for Twelfth Night Productions, New York City, presently under contract with Lite Lager Brewery. My card."

Jake Shepard, once known as the Good Shepard to baseball fans around the United States and Canada, took the proffered card and scanned the information quickly. "Alexis Celestine," he read aloud. He handed the card back and met her eyes again. "What can I do for you?"

"My company has written to you several times in the last few months, Mr. Shepard. About your contract with Lite Lager? You have one more commercial to do for that corporation before your commitment expires, and we've been trying without success to contact you about—"

"Hey," he interrupted, "You can save your breath, I'm not doing it."

"Mr. Shepard," Lexie said after a moment's open-mouthed surprise, "you're under contract! You have no choice in the

matter. The Lite Lager corporation has already paid you in advance to do three commercials."

"Are you here to use force?" he inquired with an increasingly devilish smile.

Lexie glanced over at *The Librarian* gentleman who promptly hid behind his magazine, pretending that he hadn't been listening to every word. She continued in her most businesslike voice: "I've come in advance as the—uh—scouting party, so to speak."

"And in the meantime you're scouting me," he finished with a smirk. "What do you think so far?"

"I think I'll withhold my first impression," she said dryly, before she could stop herself.

Jake smiled at her first sign of spunk. "Take your time."

His gaze slipped involuntarily down her figure, and he tipped his head as if trying to guess what her fashionably oversized coat might be hiding. But his inspection was interrupted. The barber appeared in the doorway and said, "Jake? You're next, old buddy. Ready?"

"Yeah, Ben," said Jake Shepard and without taking his amused eyes from Lexie's figure he stood up.

He was very tall and the ex-pitcher hadn't allowed his professional athlete's body to go to seed yet, she noted. Beneath the assortment of disreputable clothing, he was lithe and lean, though obviously strong and muscular. His face showed a generous five o'clock shadow, but that didn't hide his sharply cut cheekbones, an arrogant smile that would look good on television, and deeply set blue eyes under dark brows. He wasn't exactly Robert Redford, but this was a beer commercial, not a big-budget Hollywood film.

"Come on. If you want to talk, you'll have to do it in here." He turned toward the barber's inner sanctum, beckoning her to follow with a nod of his head.

He had every intention of getting his hair cut, Lexie could see. She ran into the next room after him. "Mr. Shepard—"

"Call me Jake," he interrupted. "I'm going to feel much friendlier if you call me Jake."

Jake eased his big frame into the swivel chair and relaxed while the barber whipped a smock around his chest and began to tie it at the nape of his neck. Cordially, Jake said, "Sit down and let's hear whatever you can tell me Celeste."

"Celestine," she corrected. "*Alexis* Celestine."

"Cripes," Jake said. "That's a mouthful. Do your friends call you something simpler?"

Lexie shot him a wry look as she sat gingerly on a stool. "Lexie. I'm sometimes called Lexie."

He laughed outright at that, as if very amused. "Sexy Lexie!" he exclaimed expansively. "Perfect! It fits. Right, Ben?"

"Yessir, Jake," agreed the barber. He smiled benevolently at Lexie as he snipped Jake's hair.

"Take off your coat, Lexie," Jake invited, a mischievous gleam in his eye. "It's hot in here, and you don't want to get overheated."

"I'm just fine, thank you," Lexie snapped sternly. It *was* hot, but she was darned if she'd strip at his command! "Now, if we can just discuss the commercial, Mr. Shepard. I've got to have your verbal agreement to do the commercial before I start laying the groundwork."

"Well, you may as well forget about the groundwork," Jake said pleasantly. "Because I don't intend to do the commercial."

"Lite Lager has a signed contract from you, Mr. Shepard. They can take you to court, and they'll win."

"I'll pay back the advance," Jake said. "But I won't do the commercial."

"Why *not*?" Lexie demanded in ex-

asperation. "For heaven's sake, you're bound to make a fortune in residuals, and it will take just a few days of your time! I thought commercials like these were a dream come true for guys like you."

"Guys like me?" Jake asked for clarification, brows lifted.

She had, of course, noticed the condition of his clothes, and had assumed that this was one former baseball player who had squandered his money and was now back in his hometown trying to make a living doing heaven-knew-what. Still, it would be unforgivably rude to suggest that he could probably use a few bucks. "Ex-athletes," Lexie said to explain herself.

"Look, Lexie," Jake said. "I'll be honest with you. I know I'm annoying you and your company, and a lot of money is at stake here, but I just don't want to do this thing. Can you understand that?"

"No," Lexie shot back. "I do *not* understand. What's the problem?"

"Have you read the script yet, Lexie?"

"The script" she repeated in surprise.

"Well, certainly. It—"

"It's got me and some other slob sitting in a bar somewhere, and we're drinking the beer and somebody comes along and says something cute and I turn around and deck him, right?"

"Well..." Lexie began.

"I'm right. I know I am. That's all anybody want me to do anymore. I played in the majors for six years and the minors for two, but the only thing anybody remembers me for is punching the manager of the New York Yankees in front of a cheering stadium. That's ancient history now, and I'd like to forget it ever happened. That's why I won't do the commercial. I punched somebody in the first two commercials I did, and...hey, I just don't want to be remembered forever as being a violent, hot-headed jerk with a

great uppercut, all right? I'll find a way to get out of that contract. I'll hire a lawyer on Monday."

"Monday," said Lexie, "will be too late. We've got a deadline to meet and the Lite Lager people want *you*." The heat had finally gotten to her, and she peeled her coat off her shoulders.

"Hmmm," Jake said, taking in her outfit with interest. She was wearing a red sweater made of the softest cashmere. It molded her body with a subtle affect that finally silenced Jake Shepard entirely. Momentarily entranced by the contours of Lexie's torso, he let his gaze travel up to her face again. He appeared pleased by the picture Lexie made, sitting before him on the low stool like a royal subject. "Do you think you can convince me, Lexie?" he teased archly. "Coerce me? Torture me until I give in?"

Lexie sighed. There was no sense arguing with Jake Shepard. He was not going to take her seriously. She gathered up her coat and slid off the stool. "It's been a long day for me, Mr. Shepard. I'll let you think about this overnight, okay?"

"You don't want to spend the evening discussing it further Sexie Lexie?"

Lexie threw her coat over her arm, preparing to make a grand exit. "If I had a nickel for every time I've been called that in my life, you can bet I wouldn't be in Apple Ridge, New York, looking up stubborn ex-jocks. Good night, Mr. Shepard."

"Jake," he called after her. "If we're going to be friends, you've got to call me Jake."

Lexie snorted to herself and stalked out through the waiting room. She slung her coat over her shoulders and made a grab for the doorknob. She jerked open the door and marched out into the darkness.

"Uh—Ms. Celestine?"

Lexie halted on the sidewalk and spun around, surprised by the soft-spoken

voice behind her. It was the librarian.

"Yes?" she said.

He took a hesitant step, looking painfully shy. "Uh...my name is Ted Ormsby. I couldn't help overhearing your conversation with Jake."

"I'm afraid I was rather outspoken, wasn't I?" Lexie said, smiling ruefully at him.

"May I?" he asked politely taking Lexie's coat from her. "It's quite cold out here. If you'd like to put this on, then perhaps we could talk for a moment. I—I think I might be able to help you, Ms. Celestine."

Intrigued, Lexie allowed the bashful Ted Ormsby to help her into her warm coat again. She felt her heart take a hopeful surge. "You can help me?"

"I know Jake Shepard pretty well," he said. "Maybe I could tell you how to—uh—persuade him to take part in your commercial."

"Tell on," Lexie replied cheerfully. "I'll try anything once. That is, *almost* anything," she amended.

"Just what do you have in mind?" Lexie asked as they headed up the sidewalk of Apple Ridge's main thoroughfare, a charming avenue lined with little shops.

"Are you filming the commercial here, in Apple Ridge?"

"Yes, but what does that—"

"And have you—uh—staked out a location?"

"No, I haven't chosen a bar yet." Lexie answered, puzzled. "Surely there must be several possibilities in this town, though."

Ted cleared his throat. "Are you planning on *paying* for the use of whatever bar you choose?"

"Yes, or course." Bluntly, she asked, "Just what do you have in mind?"

Ted stopped on the sidewalk and pointed across the street. "There. See that establishment? Jake's father owns it."

Lexie squinted through the swirling snowflakes at the building he was indicating. The frosted windows were illuminated by neon beer advertisements and two railroad lanterns cast their flickering light on a sign that read SHEPARD'S DEPOT.

Lexie snapped her fingers as Ted's plan suddenly became clear. "Brilliant! I offer Dad a fat reward to use his bar for a location, and he splits the take with his son, right?"

"Well..." Ted said. "It won't be quite that simple."

"What's the hitch?"

Ted sighed. "It's a complicated story. Jake and his father don't get along. They hate each other and don't speak unless it's absolutely necessary. Anyway, when Jake made a lot of money playing baseball, he felt a son's natural obligation to share it with his family. But his father wouldn't take a cent, even though he really could use it. He's seriously in debt, and Jake is helpless to do anything for him. Wayne Shepard will never accept a direct contribution from Jake."

"So...?" Lexie coaxed.

"So I think Jake might be grateful if you chose his father's establishment for the commercial, but he wouldn't *dream* of suggesting it himself."

"I get it. I've got to let Jake know I'm willing to do him a favor without actually saying it, so he won't lose face in the family feud?"

Ted nodded, "That's it."

"Okay, Mr. Ormsby, would you mind escorting me into that place? I'd better have a look at my next location. Or is Jake likely to show up there as soon as he gets his hair cut?"

"No, no," Ted said. "Jake doesn't set foot in the Depot unless he's got a really good reason."

Ted Ormsby's glasses fogged up as soon as they got past the door of the

Depot, and he fumblingly helped Lexie out of her coat. Lexie slid into the nearest booth and studied the place with a professional eye. The Depot would actually suit the purposes of Twelfth Night Productions very well. Most of the patrons were hanging around the bar, watching a TV that was perched on the top of the beer refrigerator. The Depot was a typical American tavern—nothing fancy, pleasantly unpretentious, and even cozy.

Ted went off to get some drinks, and returned, carrying a glass of white wine so carefully that he might have been bringing nectar to a goddess. Lexie accepted it from him and waited until he'd seated himself across from her. "Thanks, Mr. Ormsby. Are you a regular here?"

"Oh, no," Ted said, clutching a glass that seemed to contain only cola. "I'm not much of a drinker, Ms. Celestine."

"Call me Lexie," she insisted. "Everybody does. Have you lived in Apple Ridge for long?"

"All my life," Ted responded, stirring his soda with a swizzle stick. "Except when I went to college—uh—Lexie. Now I work at the Apple Ridge Public Library. I got to know Jake there. We're pretty well acquainted now and he's really not so bad. You can't take his manner too seriously. He—he liked you. I could tell."

"Yes," Lexie cracked ironically. "And we know exactly what he liked most about me, don't we?"

Ted instinctively dropped his eyes to the sweater Lexie wore and the natural way the soft fabric clung to her breasts. He got caught admiring the results, and flushed.

"Uh—well—er—" he stammered.

"It's all right," Lexie said, laughing and leaning forward to pat Ted's arm. "I have a big mouth and no manners myself most of the time. Maybe I've met my match in Jake Shepard. Don't you worry about me. I'm tougher than most people

think."

"Then you're not giving up? You're going ahead with the commercial?"

Lexie grinned. "There was never any doubt. I haven't got a choice, to tell you the truth. My entire future hangs in the balance. I—Good grief!" She broke off and felt herself go abruptly pale as she stared at the doorway. "I thought you said he never sets foot in this place!"

Ted spun around just in time to see Jake Shepard let himself in through the front door of the Depot.

Jake didn't glance in her direction, but eased the door closed behind him and sauntered over to their booth. He slid into the seat beside Lexie.

"Lo, Teddy Bear," Jake greeted Ted easily. "What kind of trouble are you cookin' up tonight?"

"Good evening, Jake," Ted said politely. "I'm behaving myself.

"I doubt it." Jake turned to Lexie and threw his arm across the back of the seat behind her. He was only inches away, and his knee bumped hers quite casually under the table. But that casual bump sent an electrical jolt zipping up Lexie's thigh. Lexie jumped, startled.

Jake apparently realized exactly what that contact had done to her, for his eyes were vivid and amused as he met her gaze. "Hi, there, A-lex-sis," he said with a confident grin. "Havin' a good time?"

Lexie lifted her chin an inch. "If you must know, I'm looking for a place to film the Lite Lager commercial."

"And you've picked the Depot?"

"Not yet," Lexie said, finally reaching for her wine so she'd have something to do with her hands. She wasn't about to let Jake see how they had suddenly started shaking. In a voice she hoped was steady she added. "I'm trying to decide which tavern owner in this pretty town of yours ought to receive five thousand dollars for a week's worth of filming time."

"Sexy Lexie," Jake sighed. "If you're trying to bribe me into doing this stupid commercial, you should know I really couldn't care less what happens to the person who owns this particular bar."

"I am not bribing anyone," Lexie said pleasantly. "Would you rather I take my business down the street? There must be a dozen taverns in a town this size. Shall I look at some more before I make my final decision?"

"Would you two excuse me?" Ted said, sounding half a mile away instead of just across the table. "I think I'll go order another Coke for myself."

Lexie almost called Ted back, for she was suddenly quite certain that she didn't want to be alone with Jake Shepard. She looked longingly after Ted as he headed for the bar, and Jake chuckled knowingly.

"What's the matter, Lexie? Afraid of me?"

"Should I be afraid of you, Jake?" Lexie asked tartly.

"You don't strike me as the timid kind, that's for sure." Jake's eyes slid meaningfully down her body.

"No, I'm not timid," Lexie agreed, holding still for his lingering inspection. "I'm going to get this commercial filmed, come hell or high water."

"Why?"

Lexie found herself wanting to set Jake straight. "I may as well tell you, since you'll probably get some perverted sort of pleasure out of the story. I'm trying to build my resume, you see. I want to do some film-making of my own, but I need some technical experience with an established company before anyone will invest in me alone. I need this commercial, and maybe a few more, and then I'm going to try some things I really want to do."

Jake waited, letting the moment of Lexie's self-exposure lengthen into an uncomfortably loaded pause.



Then, with perfect timing, he asked, "Do I hear violins yet?"

An exasperated laugh burst from her and she almost poured her wine in his lap. Jake registered her impulse and dodged away, chortling. When he turned back and Lexie met his eyes, they laughed together. The awkward moment snapped, leaving another, totally different feeling in the air.

"Oh, boy," Lexie signed tensely, trying not to smile. "How come I get the feeling I shouldn't have come looking for you?"

He laughed at that, and in the next second, he reached for her. Lexie couldn't move—not with her back pressed to the wall and her knees effectively pinned into stillness by Jake's much stronger thigh. Then, as if they were alone, he slipped his hand around the back of her head and turned Lexie's head so she was forced to look squarely at him. He held her firmly, inescapably, as if her were staking a claim.

Jake Shepard was testing her. With this primitive gesture, he was demanding that she yield to him. Lexie held very still for a moment, and the slowly, firmly, twisted out of his grip and inquired, "What was that all about? Did you leave your club outside or do you beat your women to the point of surrender with a baseball bat instead?"

"Do you like Teddy's technique better?" he drawled.

"His *technique*? He's a perfect gentleman. He and I had a civilized conversation."

"That's all?" he asked indulgently. "I wouldn't want to invade Ted's territory if he's already staked a claim."

"That's ridiculous," Lexie snapped, stung. "Your friend and I simply got acquainted. He didn't jump to any blatant sexual conclusions. He's not at all like you."

Jake laughed and was just about to respond to that accusation when Ted reap-

peared at the table. "Jake, Buckman just came in, and he says there's somebody outside waiting for you. One of your girlfriends."

"Well, that's that," Jake said. "Good night, Sexy Lexie. I guess you'll still be in town tomorrow morning?"

"Oh, yes," Lexie promised. "Yes, indeed."

"I like that," Jake said getting to his feet. "A lady who knows what she wants. Well, Bear, do you think you can handle her?"

Ted Ormsby just smiled. "Good night, Jake. I'll call you later. I think we have some—uh—ground rules to establish."

Jake laughed and said, "We'll flip a coin, all right?" He lifted his hand in a wave and then he was gone, without even a backward glance at Lexie.

Lexie reached for her briefcase and said, "I think I'd like to call it a night, too, if you don't mind."

"Of course, he said solicitously. "Can I escort you to your hotel?"

Lexie agreed and waited for Ted to bring her coat. Then, in the swirling snow, they walked to Lexie's hotel. In the lobby, she studiously ignored his hints that they could have another drink together in the hotel bar and bid him a firm good night.

That night, Lexie nearly called her boss and told him to find another baseball player for the Lite Lager commercial but Tony Orsino had done her a big favor by giving her this job as his production assistant at Twelfth Night. No, Lexie couldn't do that to Tony.

It had taken a lot of nerve on Lexie's part to even ask Tony for a job in the first place. She had swallowed her pride and asked him to hire her for six months, just long enough to get herself a credit that would look good on her résumé.

Lexie knew Tony had expected her to screw up every commercial she touched, and probably to fall back in love with him

in the process.

But she wasn't going to prove Tony right on any of those counts. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. She was going to do a good job. And she had no intention of moving back into his apartment and resuming her role as his glorified hostess-with-the-mostest ever again.

Lexie had ended her relationship with Tony Orsino more than a year ago. She'd been in love with him, or so she'd thought, for two years before that. The kind of life she had with Tony had been wonderful...at first. But then boredom had set in. While Lexie had nearly gone crazy with it, Tony had gone out looking for an extra girlfriend, or three, to spice things up. As soon as Lexie discovered his extracurricular activities, she got herself out of Tony's life. She moved into a small apartment of her own, and she'd started establishing her own circle of friends again. It had been a big comedown in lifestyle, but at least it had gotten her away from Phony Tony, as her father always called him.

Lexie went to bed and lay in the darkness trying to figure out her next move. Tomorrow she was going to go out and get the Lite Lager commercial off the ground. But even as she tried to keep her thoughts strictly on business, she found them circling time and again back to Jake Shepard—and in a most unprofessional manner.

Mornings were not Lexie's best time of day. All her friends knew better than to try phoning her before 11 a.m.

When the telephone rang at nine o'clock she fought her way out of the pillow and twisted sheets and groped blindly for the receiver.

The voice on the other end of the line said something that might have been "Good morning" and Lexie made a

response that sounded a little like "Agruhumph."

"I woke you up, didn't I?"

"Uhmphmm."

"Well," the cheerful voice continued, "since you're awake, you may as well come down for some breakfast. Or would you rather have me bring it up?"

Lexie dragged herself up on one elbow, fighting for consciousness. "Who—? What—? Is this—?"

"Right, it's Jake. What d'you say to breakfast in bed, Sexy Lexie? With me, of course."

Lexie said swiftly, "No, I will not have breakfast with you. Goodbye, I'm hanging up."

"No, no, don't do that," Jake said quickly laughing. "I really called to discuss the commercial with you."

"Did you change your mind about doing the commercial?" Lexie asked hopefully.

"Will you use my father's bar?" Jake asked.

"Yes." Lexie answered, wide awake now. "I spoke to the bartender and he said I could come around and talk with your father this afternoon."

"All right." Jake said. "Now there's only one more thing. The script."

Lexie frowned. "What about it?"

"You know what I want. I don't slug anyone, okay?"

Lexie sighed with irritation. "Look, I can't make any promises, but I'll try, okay?"

"That's good enough for me." Jake said. "Now, you can go back to sleep." He hung up without even a goodbye.

Later, after a sandwich in the coffee shop, Lexie gathered up her briefcase and walked to Shepard's Depot in search of Wayne Shepard, Jake's father.

The Depot door was locked and Lexie stood uncertainly on the freezing cold porch deciding what she ought to do,

when a battered pickup truck growled into the parking lot, brakes squeaking as it slid to a stop on the crunching gravel. The door opened with a screech, and the biggest man Lexie had ever seen got out.

"Miz Celeste?" he asked.

"Celestine," Lexie corrected automatically. "Lexie Celestine. I spoke with your bartender, Mr. Shepard."

He nodded, unsmiling, and reached into his hip pocket for a set of keys. "Yep. He said you wanted to use the place for a commercial."

"Yes, sir, it's—"

He jerked his head, silencing her. "Let's go inside."

He unlocked the door and led her into the Depot. Even though the interview went smoothly, Lexie was very uncomfortable. There was something about Wayne Shepard that was frightening and she was relieved when the interview was over. She excused herself and prepared to leave.

Jake's father remained seated at the table where they had talked, looking up at her with very little light in his blue eyes. Lazily he asked, "You gonna use my boy for this commercial, huh?"

"Yes," said Lexie, wrapping her scarf around her neck as she prepared to leave. "Jake Shepard has been contracted by Lite Lager."

"Hmph." Wayne flicked his cigarette on the floor. "You must make sure he's here only during the hours we agreed on. If I catch him in my place at any other time, I'm liable to pop him one."

"Pop him—?" Lexie caught herself as she realized he was threatening to strike Jake. She nodded hastily. "All right," she said. "I'll see to it."

She let herself out the door and back onto the porch, wrapping her coat tightly around her. She was glad to be out of the Depot and away from Wayne Shepard.

Lexie set off toward town, her head bent against the biting cold wind. A

horn tooted cheerily and then a green truck whipped around the corner and skid on the ice until the front tire bumped the curb. The driver leaned across and popped open the passenger door right in front of Lexie, blocking her path. Jake ducked his head out to see her. He still hadn't shaved, and he looked even scruffier than before. "What's a lovely lady like you doing in a place like this?" he drawled.

"I was just asking myself that very question," Lexie retorted, teeth chattering.

He hooked his thumb invitingly. "Hop in. I've got the heater running."

It was too cold to stand around trading clever quips so Lexie considered her options for about three seconds then skittered across the ice and made a grab for the truck door, climbed into the truck and slammed the door shut behind her. Jake didn't immediately pull away, but sat there silently for a moment, his arm thrown across the back of the seat so that he half-faced her. He smiled appreciatively as he took in her appearance. "Getting warmer?"

"A little," Lexie said. "I'm beginning to think this town is in Alaska, not New York. How do you get away with wearing just that vest? Aren't you freezing!"

"Layers." Jake tugged at his zipper to show her. "See? Two shirts and a sweater, then the vest. The secret is lots of layers. You want to see my underwear?"

"I'll pass on that treat, thanks." Lexie patted her palms together, finally warmed enough to feel her fingertips again. "Gosh, it's cold! I may get frostbite if I stay here too much longer."

"We've got all kinds of ways to keep warm," Jake said as he smiled charmingly, and reached for her wrist.

"Jake," Lexie warned as soon as he laid his hand on her. "Don't you dare..."

"Now you've done it," he murmured,

drawing her inexorably across the seat of the truck. "Could you ever resist a dare when you were a kid?"

"Neither of us is a kid now, so you—Jake—you—! *Jake!*" She made a grab for his hand just as he unfastened the belt on her coat. "Don't you—"

"Dare?" Jake asked opening her coat completely. He came closer then and kissed her. Lexie trembled once and remained still, savoring the oh-so-gentle kiss like sun-warmed wine on her mouth. Her lips parted, then coupled with Jake's until they ground together so sensually that Lexie's brain went blank. A surge of bubbling hot sensation came washing over Lexie, and unconsciously, she pressed against Jake's hard chest.

Abruptly, he tore his lips away and moved to kiss her throat, his mouth burning, it seemed, on her cool flesh. Lexie shuddered. He was overpowering her in a way she couldn't control. "J-Jake. Jake, don't."

Marshalling what few wits she had left, Lexie pressed her hand against Jake's chest and held him off. He didn't fight with her, but let her go with only an involuntary sigh that indicated his dismay. She eased away from him, seeking to put a safe eighteen inches between their bodies.

"Good grief," Lexie muttered, and she immediately put her hands in her hair to straighten it.

"Admit it," Jake said, sitting back. "We were meant for each other."

"I can't imagine why you say that!"

"Because a physical attraction like the one I feel for you doesn't come along more than once in a lifetime, I'm sure. Sweet, sexy Lexie, you can't imagine how much I want you."

Trying to be logical, Lexie demanded, "How can you want me, Jake? You don't even know me!"

"I don't know Bo Derek either or half a hundred other women that I've wanted

from time to time. But this, Lexie—"

"Look," she said sternly, still unable to look at him. "I'm not comfortable with this sex-for-fun attitude of yours. I don't know you, and I have no intention of—of anything."

Jake reached for the gearshift of the truck. "Well," he said, "I think the rest of this discussion is going to have to take place in a more private spot."

"*Jake!*" Lexie protested.

"Quiet, Lexie," he said. "Take a minute and collect yourself. You're going to need all your wits about you."

Jake ran a stop sign, doubled back through some narrow streets, and ended up driving straight up the hill—in the opposite direction from her hotel. He was seriously abducting her!

Lexie clutched the dashboard as the truck skidded around a corner and into the narrow driveway of a large Victorian house. Jake pulled up behind the house and slid the truck into a parking spot beneath a naked oak tree and set the brake with a jerk.

This was Lexie's chance to escape. She yanked at the door handle and gave the door a shove. She jumped clear of the truck and barely kept her balance. She slammed the door, took two skittering steps, then slid on the ice. She yelped as her feet shot out from under her and took a plunging nosedive. She landed on her rump in the coldest, softest pile of snow she'd ever encountered.

Jake eased himself out of the truck and gently closed the door. Musically, he called, "Ooh, Lex-ie?"

Lexie couldn't ignore the humor of the situation—even if her virtue was at risk. She could hear his boots crunching on the icy snow as he rounded the back of the truck and slowly approached her. Lexie silently began to pack a snowball between her hands. Waiting for the perfect moment, Lexie let it fly, catching him flush

on the chin. He choked out a strangled expletive and went sailing backward to land with a terrific thud on the ice.

Jake spat and leaped to his feet with a lightness that was startling in a man so big. Lexie squealed like a kid and turned to run.

She almost outran him, but he took off in a perfect diving tackle and caught her just before she reached the sidewalk. Laughing they lay panting together in the snow, Jake's body sprawled every which way and Lexie just as awkwardly plastered to his side. The moment stopped, it seemed, prolonged so that each could absorb the sensations of being in the other's arms. Her plan to douse the fire of Jake's sexual excitement had failed miserably. Worse yet, her own body was now aflame with unexpected ardor.

Before something really embarrassing could happen, she whispered, "The entire neighborhood could be watching. What will they think?"

He laughed and let her up. "You'd be surprised what my neighbors think of me. Come on. You must really be freezing now."

She didn't have much choice but to accept his hand, and Jake guided her out of the snow over the icy sidewalk. He helped her dust the worst of the snow from her coat, then led her around the big house. There was a side door, which Jake unlocked with a key he found on the ledge over the doorway. In a moment, they were on a set of creaky stairs, heading up.

"This isn't my house," he explained. "It used to be owned by a wealthy family decades ago. My landlady, Mrs. Lasky, is the granddaughter of the man who built this house, and she—"

"Yes," Lexi interrupted, "I already met Mrs. Lasky the other day when I was looking for you."

"You talked to my landlady?"

"Of course. I talked to everyone in

town about you, I think. But I couldn't get much information from anybody. They must have thought I was an old girl friend, looking to file a paternity suit."

Jake laughed and shouldered open the door at the top of the stairs. He let Lexie go ahead of him and remained behind, stripping off his vest.

It was easy to see that his apartment had been converted from a large family dwelling. The rooms were cut up and oddly located. The kitchen was the first room inside the door. It was actually no more than a hallway that had been lined with cupboards, counter and appliances.

A bathroom door was next to the refrigerator, and then a beautifully arched doorway opened into a living room. Jake's furniture was modern, durable, and didn't look cheap. For the first time since she'd met Jake, Lexie realized that the man truly had been wealthy once. Perhaps he still was. Lexie had assumed from Jake's style of dressing that he had already blown all his baseball money and endorsement residuals—most likely on wild women and flashy cars—but judging by the looks of the apartment he still had some of his riches left.

Lexie's sharp eye fell on a needlepoint pillow tucked into a corner on the sofa. She crossed directly to the sofa and picked up the pillow. It read: Ya gotta have heart or the dames will ignore ya. She was still holding the pillow when Jake arrived behind her. He took the pillow from her hands and tossed it over his shoulder. Grabbing her wrist, he pulled her closer, slipped his free hand inside her coat and then snaked it around her back. He dropped his arms, as if he had been suddenly startled. "Good, Lord, you're sopping wet inside!" He let her go and removed her coat. "How did you get so much snow up in that Siberian coat of yours?"

"You did it, remember? When you

tackled me."

"Don't look so proud of yourself," he shot back cheerfully, taking a look at the wet seat of his jeans before shrugging and then turning to Lexie once more.

"You're a real mess," Jake observed, standing back for a better assessment of her appearance. "Soaked. I'll make a fire and we'll hang your clothes nearby so they don't get scorched or whatever. There's bound to be something here that you can wear in the meantime. Come on, my clothes will keep you more covered up than your own!"

Lexie hesitated. Taking her clothes off for him would be plain foolishness.

"I'll make some hot chocolate," Jake said, wheedling now. "With marshmallows?"

A cup of hot chocolate did sound delicious, and a fire in that pretty fireplace would absolutely be lovely on this cold winter afternoon.

Jake saw that she was seriously considering the possibilities, and he said briskly, "It's settled then. Come this way to the bathroom."

He left her at the bathroom door and went off with Lexie's wet coat over his arm.

As Lexie let herself into the bathroom, she caught her reflection in the mirror. What a mess! She was in the process of making some repairs, when Jake knocked at the door. She opened the door and peered out warily.

"Here," he said, handing her a shirt of his and some hangers.

Lexie undressed and hung her clothes on the hangers. She slipped on Jake's shirt and examined her reflection in the mirror. The sleeves fell below her elbows, and the tops of her knees showed from under the bottom of the shirt. She found a terry-cloth robe of Jake's hanging on the back of the bathroom door and slipped that on too. Barefoot, she let herself out of the

bathroom.

Jake was in the living room, crouched on one knee by the fireplace. He'd changed into a pair of dry jeans.

He glanced up at her entrance, sat back on his heels, looked her up and down and grinned. "I should have hidden that bathrobe in the hamper. Can I convince you to take it off and model the shirt alone?"

"Don't waste your energy. Where's the hot chocolate you promised?"

"I think I'll save a little more energy and let you take care of that yourself." He hefted a split log from a basket beside the fireplace and added over his shoulder, "It's already on the stove. Cups on the shelf above the toaster. Marshmallows around somewhere."

When Lexie brought two mugs of hot chocolate back into the living room, a fire was crackling cheerfully in the grate. Jake was on his feet, purposefully peeling off his shirt. Lexie stopped dead at the sight.

He threw the shirt on the sofa. Fortunately, he was wearing another shirt under that one. Layers, Lexie remembered, regaining her poise.

Jake turned and saw her coming. "Great," he said looming over her. "Fire, hot drinks, and the girl's half naked already. Now we can get this seduction on the road!"

That did it.

"I'm leaving," Lexie announced.

"No, you're not. I've got your clothes, remember?" Jake teased.

"I can't figure you out, Shepard," she said as he grabbed her arms and pulled her gently to the fireside, careful not to spill the hot chocolate. "Here, use these pillows. The floor is much better than the sofa—nearer the fire, I mean."

"What's the matter? Do you get muscle cramps making love on the couch?"

Jake laughed delightedly and removed one of the mugs from her hands before



guiding her down onto the floor. "That's what I like most about you. Lex. You lay your cards right on the table."

"And you don't?"

"I like keeping a few secrets," Jake admitted as he stretched his long frame out beside her on the floor. "Like most men, I don't want to give away too much of myself too early in a potential relationship. I'm afraid of getting my feelings hurt. And I suspect you wouldn't hesitate to turn all kinds of ammunition against me, right?"

Lexie was sitting cross-legged beside him, facing the cheery fire. She suddenly relaxed a bit, though—Jake was temporarily acting relatively harmless—and uncurled her legs to stretch her bare toes toward the flames. She agreed with Jake's observation, saying, "I learned very early that anything you say can be held against you. At least that's the way it worked in my family. If you let anything personal slip, somebody was sure to dredge it up later at the most inopportune time."

"I bet your family is a lively bunch."

Lexie laughed. "Lively? You win that bet, all right! My father is known as S. F. Celestine—that's for Santino Francis, but we all say the initials stand for Short Fuse. And my four older brothers have all played the protective bit since I was a baby. They send me checks, do you believe it? I'm twenty-eight, and they still think they've got to support me."

"Do they?"

She mustered up a glare at him. "Of course not! I burn them and send the ashes in plastic bags, C.O.D. I believe in demonstrating my feelings whenever possible—a trait I notice you don't suppress, either."

"Me? Yep, I'm demonstrative, too, I suppose," he said.

"Brothers or sisters?" Lexie asked, deciding it was high time she learned something about Jason Shepard.

Jake shook his head and swallowed his marshmallow. "Nope. Only child. My parents got divorced when I was a kid, and my mother lives downstate now. She's remarried, and her new husband had three children, but I don't see them much, except on holidays. We're all pretty busy with our own lives, I guess."

"Why—" Lexie stopped herself before she asked the wrong kind of question.

Jake waited for her to sort out her thoughts, and then he said softly, "Go on."

Lexie took a cautious look at him. "I wondered, that's all. It's obvious that you and your father don't see eye to eye. And if your mother doesn't live here anymore, why do you?"

He smiled at her. "It's my hometown. I've got friends here."

"Not—?"

"No special *girl* friends, if that's what you're fishing for. I like to play the field, you know. I am not about to get married and never have been. I haven't got a steady girl friend who keeps me here in Apple Ridge, but I admit I date a lot of women." He looked directly at her. "The point is, sweet Lexie, that I'm very free and—at the moment—very easy."

Lexie shook her head with a wry smile. "I could care less about the woeful condition of your sex life, you know. Why do I keep getting myself into these conversations with you?"

"Because you love them," Jake taunted cheerfully. He sat up and put his empty cup aside. He began massaging the arch of her right foot with very warm hands.

"Look," Lexie explained, trying to tug her foot out of his possession, "I don't usually find myself in this kind of situation! If I finally do something really out of character, chances are I'll—"

"Are you a good girl, Lexie?" Jake interrupted curiously, still smiling as he held her fast. "Don't you prowl the singles

bars in New York looking for good times”

“Are you serious?” she demanded. “I told you I have *four* big brothers. My upbringing was as strict as you can get, Shepard. I still don’t fool around.”

Unabashed, Jake switched feet and said calmly, “Well? Am I in any danger of getting my kneecaps broken by the man in your life?”

“The man in my life...” Lexie began, and then her voice trailed off as she averted her face to look into the flames. She could lie to him now and make life easier for herself. Or perhaps more complicated. No, it was best to tell Jake the truth. “The man who used to be in my life is now—Well, you’ll meet him one of these days. We broke up a while ago.”

“Do you still see him?”

“Yes, of course. But now—well, let’s just say that he’s like you, Shepard. Not interested in monogamy. I moved when I found—Look, it doesn’t matter now,” Lexie said, ending her explanation abruptly.

“I think,” Jake said, “that you still aren’t sure the relationship is really over.”

Jake was holding one of her ankles in each of his hands, and he tightened his grip just a little and pulled at her ankles, sliding Lexie across the floor until her bottom met his crossed legs. He let go of her ankles then and with no apparent effort, lifted her right onto his lap, so that her bare legs were around his waist. Jake slipped one arm around her back, then up into the nearly dry tumble of her hair to hold her still. His other hand rested casually on the curve of her bottom. His eyes were alight, but lazy-lidded, and his smile didn’t change. A sexy, knowing smile.

“Jake...” she warned.

“We’re both single,” he said, as though listing their qualifications, “both unattached, consenting adults. Maybe it’s

time you took a chance, Lex. It could be fun.”

“Are we back to talking about sex!”

“When I’m with you, that’s pretty much all I can think about.” He held her loosely, smiling down into her eyes. His voice dropped a little lower, coaxing. “You’re on the threshold of a terrific opportunity, Lexie. This is your chance to try the same thing your boyfriend did. Be impulsive. Experiment. Sex for the sake of sex isn’t all bad, y’know.”

“You are *so* disgusting,” Lexie murmured, even as her arms were slipping around his neck. Jake moved close enough to touch her lips very lightly with his own. The contact was electric as his arms enfolded her tightly.

Lexie closed her eyes and let the pleasure wash over her like a warm surf. This loss of control and his subtle domination were scary and wonderful at the same time. The exhilaration building inside her was amazing. Still there were so many doubts, so many reasons why she shouldn’t allow him to touch her.

“Jake,” Lexie sighed, wanting to slow him down just a little. She tried to press her palm against his chest, but the temptation was too much and she turned the push into a caress. She wanted to feel his body without the barrier of his flannel shirt, no matter how soft the fabric felt beneath her hand.

“You can’t stop yourself now, can you? You’re as out of control as I am. You and I, Lexie—we were meant to get together this way.”

“Jake,” she said, laying her hand along his cheek. “Kiss me”

He watched her eyes. “Are you sure? About taking a chance with me here and now? You won’t cry...after? Won’t hate me?”

She smiled as she began to unbutton his shirt. “I won’t cry. But I won’t promise not to hate you either.”

When they were both naked to the waist and shivering in each other's arms from suppressed desire, Jake gathered Lexie to his chest. He tipped her head back until her mouth met his in a tremulous union. The kiss was a deep, meaningful coupling of their mouths, establishing once and for all that the lovemaking to come could not be stopped. She didn't recognize her own voice when she heard a yearning moan.

She let her woman's instincts take over. What she remembered afterward was a kaleidoscope of sensual and erotic images. Jake's hard, tensile body. Her own kneading hands, first gentle with trepidation, then insistent.

Perhaps it was the added stimulation of not quite knowing this man to whom she had surrendered, but Lexie abandoned herself as she never had before. She played, demanded, and did her share of tantalizing too. Time dissolved completely, and Lexie felt herself slip in and out of reality as Jake forced her finally to a fiery climax.

Somehow, the afternoon melted into evening, and the evening drifted into night. The fire burned low, but if the room turned cool, Lexie never noticed. Though the urgency had waned, excitement was still alive inside her. She felt giddy with the loss of her inhibitions, braver with each passing moment of laughter. If ever there as a fantasy to be lived, she had done it, she realized. She had made exquisite love with a man she hardly knew, a man she had done her best to dislike.

A long, long time later, a clock struck the hour somewhere in the house, and Jake sat up abruptly, surprising Lexie with his quick change of mood. "Be right back with something to eat. Do you want a beer? I've got soda, too, but no wine, sorry. Or there's milk. Hot chocolate later, okay? Before bed."

Lexie glanced up. "Am I staying that

long?"

"Oh, yes," Jake promised, heading for the kitchen.

Jake returned from the kitchen, bearing sandwiches, bottles, plates and silverware and seconds later was nestling beside her on the floor again. He talked and made her laugh as Lexie devoured her sandwich.

It was very late when Lexie finally admitted she was tired, and Jake didn't even suggest the possibility of taking her back to the hotel. She allowed Jake to carry her to his bedroom, where he tucked her in and prepared to go to sleep. Her legs warmly entangled with his, Lexie allowed a small sigh to escape her lips.

Jake placed a single kiss on her temple and said huskily, "Satisfied."

Yes, Lexie had to admit that she did feel satisfied. Very, very satisfied.

Mornings, for Lexie, always were a precarious time. She generally had trouble waking up, which was why she was not very happy when Jake shook her shoulder at some ungodly hour the following day.

"Go 'way," she mumbled.

"I'd like to go away," Jake said meaningfully. "I'm supposed to be at work in half an hour. At least rise, huh? Hey, anybody in there?"

"Go 'way!" she repeated as Jake dragged her up out of the pillows by her elbows. "How can I get any work done if I know you're spending the morning in my bed without me?" he said laughingly.

Lexie opened one eye and grinned. "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

Jake grinned appreciatively, and the sight of him startled Lexie into opening both her eyes in amazement.

Jake was dressed in a neatly pressed plaid shirt and a knit tie, for heaven's sake! Lexie stared at the vision before her. The tomcat was transformed.

"You shaved!" Lexie put her palm to

his face to confirm the fact, and his cheek was indeed smooth.

"It was the weekend, for crying out loud! I've got to give this baby face a rest sometimes."

Lexie reached up and made a playful pretense of straightening his tie and said softly, "Have a nice Monday, all right?"

"Is that what day it is?" he asked, going in for a feeble joke. He smiled a little then, and admitted ruefully, "I can't think straight."

"Well, I hope you'll have time to collect your wits in the next day or two." She said, "We'll want you in top form for the commercial."

He shook his head, as if clearing out the cobwebs. "The commercial! I forgot. Listen, I know its crass to talk business at a time like this, but you won't forget to speak to whoever it is about the script, will you?"

"Yes, I'll mention it to Tony." Lexie lay back in the pillows and cushioned her hands underneath the back of her head. Seriously, she said, "Remember, I didn't promise anything, Jake. I'll see what I can do, that's all."

He grinned, eyeing her sheet-shrouded figure with pleasure. "I have confidence in you, Ms. Celestine. Look, I've got to go before the temptation becomes irresistible. Good-bye. I'll call you."

A few moments after Jake left, Lexie threw off the covers and climbed out of bed. She found her clothes neatly hung on the bedroom doorknob where Jake had put them and got dressed quickly. As she was hunting for her boots she heard the distant ring of a doorbell. And then Lexie heard footsteps on the stairs. Either Jake was coming back, or he was getting a visitor: Lexie automatically hurried into the kitchen to find out which.

It was a visitor—Ted Ormsby! He must have known where Jake kept his key, and he must have felt welcome in Jake's apart-

ment, for he came bursting through the door shouting, "Hey, Jake! Where are—Oh."

Lexie stared at Ted, and he, startled, stared right back.

Hurriedly, Lexie said, "Jake's not here right now, Ted. I'm sorry. Is it something important? What you wanted to see Jake about?"

"Not really. Actually, you've answered my question just by being here. I guess I lose," he said.

"Lose?" Lexie asked, "What do you mean?"

Ted shrugged. "Just a friendly bet, that's all. Between Jake and me. I have to tell you, though, I never figured you were the type, Lexie."

Truly confused, Lexie stared at Ted. Carefully, she asked, "What type?"

"You know," Ted said easily, sauntering into the kitchen and making himself at home. "The type who would go for Jake. I really thought he'd lose, and I'd get my chance. That's why I let him go first. Usually, we flip a coin."

"I see," Lexie said, her brain whirring. Suddenly she couldn't catch her breath.

"Well, all's fair," Ted said lightly, and he perched himself on the edge of the kitchen stool to look at Lexie with a smile. He shrugged, "I lose a chance for some good times with you, I guess. I figured I'd let Jake do all the hard work and then step in later when you figured you were safe. Jake had until the day after tomorrow."

Lexie laid her hands on the kitchen counter to steady herself. She was furious. And humiliated. How could Jake have done such a thing?

Lexie's hands shook. Her whole body began to tremble with the force of her anger.

"Hey," Ted said suddenly noticing the look of rage on her face. "Don't take it so hard. It was worth it wasn't it? I hear Jake's great in the sack."

The chocolate syrup was in plain view on the counter. Lexie snatched it up without hesitation and dumped it over Ted Ormsby's head.

Snatching up her coat, she stormed out of Jake Shepard's apartment and almost ran back to her hotel. Her throat was so tight with tears that she was actually in pain by the time she flung herself into her room and slammed the door behind her.

She ripped off her coat, undressed and showered, hoping the scalding hot water would wash away the memory of Jake's touch on her skin. She wanted to forget everything about her night with him.

When the phone in her room rang later that morning, Lexie jumped at the sound, wondering if it was Jake who was calling her.

She finally snatched up the receiver, ready to throw every ounce of fury at him, but it wasn't Jake at all. Lexie was suddenly relieved to find that it was only Tony, calling to say that he and the rest of the crew were stopping for a bite to eat but they'd be arriving in Apple Ridge before nine in the evening.

Cheered by the sound of a familiar voice, Lexie changed her clothes and decided she'd better get to work. She had a commercial to get into production, and she was going to have to find a way to cope with Jake until the job was done.

Lexie was waiting in the lobby to greet Tony and the crew when they arrived a little after nine. Tony instructed the crew to report for work at eleven o'clock the next morning. "We have a lot of setting up to do. It will be a couple of days before I'm ready to start shooting."

Tony insisted Lexie have a nightcap with him in the hotel bar, ostensibly to make plans for the following day. Lexie agreed but she had mixed emotions about working so closely with Tony. She was worried he might try to renegotiate their

relationship once they started spending more time together.

As they were discussing the commercial, Lexie thought about the problem with the script. She had promised to intervene on Jake's behalf, but that was before Ted's revelation. Now she couldn't care less.

"What about the star?" Lexie asked. "Do you want Shepard on the set tomorrow?"

Tony waved his hand impatiently, making some notes on his ever-present clipboard. "No, no, no. I don't want the jock stumbling around my set any sooner than he has to. Tell him to stand by, though, in case we get set up sooner than I expect."

"Okay, Tony." Lexie said as she got up. "I'm calling it a night. See you in the morning."

"Good night, darling," Tony said, going back to his clipboard without a moment's pause.

As she entered her room a few minutes later, Lexie's phone was ringing. This time she was sure it was Jake and she let it ring seven times before it fell silent.

When it rang again, Lexie snatched up the receiver and tightly said, "Hello?"

"Did I get you out of the shower, I hope?" Jake asked.

Lexie said in a stone-cold voice, "I can't believe you've got the gall to speak to me."

"What?"

"I talked with your sneaky friend Ted today. Didn't he tell you?"

"What—Oh."

"Yes, *oh*. He told me the whole story, Jake. I should have caught on from the start, I suppose, but I was too damn stupid. I hope you're proud of yourself."

"Lexie—"

"Don't Jake!" Lexie shouted. "I'm not interested in anything you have to say."

"Lex, let me come over and we can—"

"Forget it, Shepard! I don't want to see you. I don't want to hear from you. I'd leave this stupid town tonight if I didn't have a job to do!"

"Then I'll see you at the Depot when we start filming. I can—"

"I don't want to see you any sooner than I have to. Tomorrow the crew will be setting up and we won't need you. Just keep your distance, Shepard, or I'll—"

Hastily, he broke in and began trying to explain. "Lexie, I admit that what Ted and I arranged was juvenile. But, Lex, after you and I made love, I wanted to—"

"I don't want to hear it!" Lexie cried, and slammed down the receiver.

Her heart was on a roller-coaster ride. She felt a pain inside that she'd never felt before.

By noon the following day, the Lite Lager commercial was officially in production. Cameras were unloaded from the truck, and the lights were painstakingly unpacked and assembled.

Shepard's Depot was hustling, all right. The regular patrons wanted to watch the goings-on, and Lexie had a hard time following Tony's orders to keep them at bay during the afternoon. As the supper hour approached, though, the public began filtering into the bar.

By five-fifteen, it was almost impossible to get anything accomplished amid the crowd of people hanging around, but Tony was determined to finish setting up. "Only another half-hour," he told the crew. "Then we'll clear out for the night."

Tony had his back to the door when he made that announcement, so he missed the star of the commercial's grand entrance. Lexie, however, had seen Jake as soon as he stepped over the threshold, and her heart did a flip-flop, despite her determination to maintain a purely profes-

sional attitude.

Tony had undoubtedly seen Lexie's face pale, for he turned around to determine what apparition had caused her silent reaction. "Oh, no," he muttered under his breath. "All we need right now are a few helpful hints from the jock who's done a couple of commercials already and thinks he's an expert!" Then, collecting himself, Tony went straight across the floor, hand outstretched. "Hello, hello, you must be Shepard. I'm Tony Orsino, the director and owner of Twelfth Night Productions."

Jake took the hand Tony offered, and said "I thought I'd stop by and see how you were coming along."

"Well, we're not ready for you yet," Tony quickly replied. "You may as well go home and wait for us to call."

"Okay," Jake said lazily, letting his gaze rest momentarily on Tony again to get a more comprehensive first impression. As he studied Tony's trim safari jacket with its cunningly knotted belt and silk shirt beneath, Jake's mouth curved just a little. "Mind if I have a beer before I go?" he asked.

"Uh—no, not at all," Tony said, stepping back to allow Jake to come the rest of the way into the tavern. "The bar is open, as you see. This is my assistant, Ms. Celestine. Oh, but you've talked already, haven't you?"

Lexie swallowed hard as Jake approached her. She certainly hadn't expected their first post-lovemaking face-to-face confrontation to be quite so public. Fortunately they were too far way from Tony for him to overhear their conversation.

He grinned as he came to a stop before her. "Hiya, Lex."

"Stuff it," she snapped, keeping her face expressionless for Tony's benefit. "Mr. Orsino says we won't need you until tomorrow afternoon, so why don't you



take a hike?"

"I'm going to have a drink," he said, smiling slightly as he watched her face flush with anger.

Tony arrived at her side then, and Lexie wondered how much he had seen or heard. Tony said breezily, "Lexie, Johnny needs you, I think. Run along, darling."

Jake heard the word, and he glanced sharply at Lexie.

She gathered up her clipboard and murmured to Tony, "Yes, sweetheart," before gliding smoothly away to help the light man.

When she finished helping Johnny, though, Jake was still sitting on the last stool at the end of the bar. His long legs were stretched out so she would have to step over them to get back to work.

Lexie faltered to a stop, eyeing him with suspicion. "Are you trying to corner me?"

He didn't move from his relaxed position, which effectively blocked her escape. "Looks that way, doesn't it?"

"I have nothing to say to you Shepard."

"You know I'd much rather hear you say my first name, Lexie. Try again: Say, I've missed you in the last day and a half, Jake, darling."

She gave him an unladylike snort of derision. "The chances of winning the Irish sweepstakes are better than—"

"Hey," he interrupted softly, watching her face. "You call *him* darling."

"Who? Tony? No, *he* calls *me* darling," she said with relish. "I call him something entirely different."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "Is this the guy you told me about? The one you're still in love with?"

"I never said—" Lexie caught herself again. How could one man make her so angry and so female-breathless at the same time? To avoid making a public

display of herself, she moved closer to Jake and snapped, "My relationship with Tony is none of your business, Mr. Shepard."

"I'm sorry," Jake said at once, very softly, sounding amazingly sincere.

Lexie didn't speak, just stared.

"I am," he said simply. "If you've got something going with Tony, that's okay. But I don't give up easily, Lexie."

"What does *that* mean?"

"It means I'm going to fight for you, Lex. I'll fight Ted and Tony and anyone else who stands between you and me. I'm hooked, lady."

"Oh, stop it. You've already won your bet with Ted. I'm not going to be your willing victim any longer, and I'm certainly not going to believe another word you say."

"The bet *is* over," Jake agreed. "That's behind us, I'm glad to say. I'm ashamed that it happened in the first place. I've done everything wrong up until now, and I'm sorry but there's more between you and me than just sex." He paused, and his eyes sparkled brighter than ever. "Of course," he added with a hint of a smile, "the sex was pretty great, don't you think?"

Lexie stared at him, hesitant to believe anything Jake Shepard said. Coldly, she said, "I'll bet that's what you've told all your friends, isn't it? Every detail about what we did together?"

Jake released her then, his smile fading. "I suppose I deserve that. Someday you'll understand how bad I feel about this, Lexie. Look, I think I should go now and give you some time to cool down, okay?"

"Good idea," Lexie said, but she couldn't quite manage to sound as angry as before.

"When do we start filming?" he asked, watching her face as he zipped his jacket.

"The filming," Lexie said blankly. "Oh, the commercial. Tony says we may

be ready for you Thursday afternoon. If not, then Friday morning."

"Okay," Jake said patiently, and he started to dig into his trouser pocket. "Then you'll have to call me at work when you need me. Here. This is the number."

Lexie watched as Jake took a pen from inside his jacket and turned to lay the piece of paper on the bar. As he was writing down a phone number, she said, "You actually have a job, then, huh?"

He gave her a slight grin and went back to writing. "Sure. What did you think? That I was still living off the residuals of that last Lite Lager commercial?"

Lexie blushed and found herself unable to meet his gaze. She took the paper and said quickly, "I meant—I didn't—it was—"

"It's okay," Jake said easily. "We'll have time to get better acquainted when things calm down a little."

Lexie glared up at Jake, then looked away in terrible confusion. Taking a steady breath, she said, "Go home Shepard. I'll call you when we're ready for you."

On Thursday, Tony discovered that he was indeed running ahead of schedule and he needed Jake on the set to start blocking for the commercial. Lexie dutifully made the telephone call and, much to her surprise, was routed through two secretaries before she finally heard Jake's voice on the line.

"We're ready for you. Come pick up your script and get to work," she said without identifying herself.

"Oh, is that all? Well, then, I suppose I'd better show up," Jake said. "As soon as I take care of a couple of things, okay? Give me a few minutes to clear my desk."

Clear his desk? He had a desk job? Though she was curious about that remark, Lexie ran off and reported to Tony, who was annoyed that Jake wasn't

dropping everything to come running immediately.

"It's about time!" Tony snapped when Jake walked into the Depot, twenty minutes later.

"What's with Sir Tony?" Jake muttered to Lexie when she arrived at his side to take his jacket and give him a script.

"Just nerves," Lexie whispered back as Tony stalked away to the set. "He gets like this when he's working. Go on over to the bar and have a seat, all right? That's your place, see it? Tony wants to start right away."

"Heaven forbid we keep Tony waiting," Jake responded, and he sauntered obediently toward the bar, script in hand, skirting the lights and stepping cautiously over the snaking cables. He headed straight for the bar stool that was planted center stage, surrounded by lights and the two cameras.

"All right, all right," Tony called, getting everyone's attention. "Let's run through the concept so that we all know what's going on. Ready?...Lights up. Find the Good Shepard sitting at the bar. There'll be a buddy of his sitting on the other seat. The guys exchange a few lines about the beer and then the third guy comes up behind Shepard, does his bit, and then Shepard, you turn around and punch him. Got it?"

"Yeah," Jake drawled slowly, studying the script for the first time. "I've got it all right, coach. Except..."

Lexie heard the change in Jake's tone and looked up from her clipboard, instantly alert. She had deliberately not told Tony about Jake's objection to the script in her anger over the bet with Ted. But now she wished she'd kept her personal and professional feelings separate. She could sense trouble brewing.

"Except what?" Tony asked testily.

"Except that I'd rather not hit the guy," Jake said placidly as the whole

roomful of people came to attention.

"But you *have* to hit somebody," Tony said, sounding incredulous. "That's what you're *known* for, Shepard."

"There must be lots of other ways to do this commercial," Jake drawled. "What's the big deal?"

"The big deal," Tony said, sarcastically, "is that we have a tight schedule—too tight to accommodate a star with a prima-donna complex."

"I'm not trying to be a prima donna. I just think there are other possibilities. How about if I start to hit the guy but end up doing something funny instead? Or—"

"Hitting him *is* funny!" Tony bellowed.

Tony turned to Lexie and with the wrath of a war god flashing in his eyes shouted at her, "What do you know about this?"

Lexie tried to back her way out of the fray by saying, "I knew that he was...Mr. Shepard did mention that he was unhappy with the idea of..."

"Of *what*?" Tony screamed. "That he was supposed to deck another character? You knew he wasn't going to do the commercial unless we rewrote it? And you *agreed*?"

"Don't take it out on her," Jake broke in sharply from the bar. "I'm the one who's asking for some changes."

Tony spun around to glare at Jake. "It's a little late to be asking for changes!" he snarled.

"Tony," Lexie said, hoping she could negotiate some kind of acceptable compromise, "I think—"

"You're not paid to think!" Tony shouted at her. "You're paid to do what I tell you! Now shut up and get me some aspirin!"

Lexie controlled her own temper with what she thought was admirable strength. She had won more than a few shouting

matches against Tony Orsino in the past, but this was not the time or place. In six months, she could be her own boss. She swallowed her anger, took a deep breath, and said peaceably, "Yes, Tony."

When she returned, the two men were still arguing. As Tony's temper zoomed up and down the decibel scale, Jake remained implacably determined. Tony screamed and Jake reasoned.

Lexie decided that she had better intervene. Jake wasn't going to budge and Tony was going to blow a gasket any minute now. "Hey, Tony, it's getting late, and I think everybody's hungry. Why don't we shut down for today and think about this overnight? It's too late to start any real filming today anyway."

She knew exactly how to baby him, and she played it up with just the right dose of concern and respect. Being Tony's former lover had its advantages, after all. She took his arm and turned him away from the cameras and toward the coat rack.

"All right," Tony agreed, shrugging into his coat with the air of an exhausted child. "I am tired."

Lexie urged Tony out the door and escorted him back to the hotel. She tried discussing the commercial with him but he didn't want to talk about Jake Sheppard. Tony was angry. Maybe even jealous. Lexie decided the best course was to leave him alone for a while.

By the time Friday came, Lexie wasn't sure where she stood with anyone. Tony was still angry. Jake cooperated for the first ten minutes of the morning. The rest of the day was awful.

Tony set up the scene and started the actors on their lines. Jake went along with the rehearsal until it came time for him to stand up and punch the other actor. Jake stood up, all right, but he very calmly objected to the scene as it had been written. Tony's face turned to stone as Jake began suggesting a different ending.

Lexie listened to them argue for half an hour. The whole crew was edgy. Why couldn't one of them back down? Lexie wondered. For safety's sake, she kept quiet.

Tony looked ready to strangle Jake. "Shepard," he finally snarled, "there is no other way to do this commercial. Either you do it right now the way it was written, or we're going to spend all day tomorrow and the next day and the next day right in this very spot until you crack."

"I won't be here tomorrow," Jake said calmly.

"Why not?"

"I'm sorry. I can come Sunday but not tomorrow. It's my grandmother's funeral," Jake said with a perfectly straight face.

Lexie was absolutely sure Jake was not heading for a funeral. His explanation shut Tony up, though.

In a deadly quiet voice, he said, "All right, then. If you're not coming tomorrow, we had better get this commercial finished tonight. Got that, Shepard? That means you *follow the script*. Understand?"

"Look—" Jake began.

"I mean it!" Tony shrieked. "Let's rehearse the damn thing once, all right?"

Jake hesitated briefly. He was tired, and everyone else in the room was on edge. Perhaps Tony had finally worn him down. It seemed that Jake might be on the verge of giving in.

It was now or never, Lexie thought. Risking Tony's temper herself, she leaned forward into the light of the set. Jake caught her movement and glanced at her, and Lexie met his eyes. Softly, as if they were alone, she said, "Try it, Jake. This can't go on forever." She hesitated, then added bravely, "I'm sorry. I owe you one."

Jake waited, as if making sure Lexie

didn't want to snatch back her words. She nodded once, reaffirming.

"All right," Jake said then, turning back to Tony. "Let's try it once."

Tony glared openly at Lexie, transferring his rage from Jake to her in the space of three seconds. Clenching his teeth he said, "Since our esteemed star has deigned to cooperate, let's try it, all right? From the top. Who has the first line?"

The rehearsal began then, with the actor and Jake slowly exchanging lines. Jake was reading his lines like a good boy. When Tony—too tired and frustrated to think straight—suddenly broke into the dialogue.

"Now look," he interrupted just as Dion, the third actor was supposed to come into camera range. Tony led the actor forward to his place behind Jake, saying, "You come this way and tap Shepard on the shoulder just like this. See? You say the bit, and, Shepard, you stand up—don't just sit there, you moron! Get up and throw the punch."

"Tony!" Lexie called, suddenly anxious. There was enough tension in the air to frighten her. Any second now, Tony was going to say something truly terrible and Jake might even punch him, instead of the other actor. He had struck the Yankees' manager over much less, hadn't he? Lexie got up quickly and hurried onto the set to stop Tony before he got hurt. "Tony, please—"

"Shut up, you stupid idiot!" Tony shrieked, spinning around to face her. "We finally get started and you butt in just when—"

"Hey," Jake objected, sounding serious. He got to his feet and turned on Tony. "Don't take it out on her, chum."

"Listen, you—" Tony bellowed. "Butt out."

His eyes narrowing dangerously, Jake said, "Don't give her the abuse you'd like to be giving me, Orsino. Face it," he said

coldly. "You don't mind bullying Lexie, but you're scared silly of me, aren't you?"

That did it. Tony lost his tenuous grip on sanity and let loose a roundhouse punch that would have felled an enraged bull. Jake took it right on the cheekbone. His head snapped back sharply, and his whole body catapulted backward. He hit the rim of the bar with an awful crunch and then somersaulted over the bar.

"*Jake!*" Lexie leaped forward without thinking, grabbed Tony's arm and hung on. "*Tony!* Stop it! You're crazy! Don't do it! He'll kill you!"

"*I'll kill him!*" Tony shouted, fighting to get at Jake. "Let me go! Let me at him!"

"Stop it!" Lexie shouted. "Johnny, help me! Dion, what's happening? Is he alright?"

Dion had dived down under the bar to see about Jake and he popped up almost immediately, looking round-eyed and as flabbergasted as everyone else. "He's alive, boss, but that's about it. Man, did you see that punch?!"

Johnny finally arrived at her side, and together they managed to wrestle Tony off the set. Puffing, Johnny looked over Tony's struggling body at Lexie and grinned. "You won't believe it. The camera was running! It was incredible! We got it all on film!"

"What?"

"I'm serious," Johnny said gleefully. "With some editing and a rewrite of the first few lines, I think we've got our commercial."

Somehow Johnny and Lexie managed to get Tony out of the tavern and into the company van. Lexie drove as fast as she could to the hotel. All she could think about was Jake. Was he all right? Were they taking him to the hospital? Would he blame her for the whole debacle?

Tony was still angry, but fairly subdued by the time they arrived at the hotel. Lexie

trundled him straight up to his room and quickly ordered some food and a glass of brandy from room service.

"I'm not sick," he fussed when she insisted he get into bed. "I just feel—I feel like..."

"Like what?" Lexie prodded.

"Like I'm jealous," Tony said, lifting his head to stare at her. "Because of you."

"Me!"

Tony nodded, looking wide-eyed as if he'd just made a tremendous discovery. "He likes you, doesn't he? And you like him?"

"I really don't want to discuss him with you," Lexie said, standing up. "We'll talk this all over tomorrow."

Tony watched as she gathered up her coat to leave. Softly, he said, "You're going to him now, aren't you?"

"Yes," Lexie said. "I think I'd better make some apologies for you." If he lets me, she added silently to herself. She wasn't at all sure Jake would even want to see her right now.

When Jake didn't answer the knock, Lexie found the key to his apartment on the ledge over the doorway. She let herself in, climbed the steps to the second floor, and tapped hesitantly there.

No response.

Cautiously, she opened the door and in a too-high voice she hardly recognized as her own, she called, "Jake?"

Silence.

"Jake?" she called again. "May I come in?"

Then she heard a small thump and a moment later Jake appeared—not from the living room but from a doorway behind the kitchen. One half of his face looked fine, but the other was already discolored and swollen. He was going to have quite a black eye.

He glowered at her and asked, "Have you come to finish me off?"

"Look, Jake, I'm really sorry about what happened."

"Making apologies for your pal?"

"Yes," Lexie said, ignoring his sarcastic tone for the moment. "Tony's behavior was awful, but I'm sure he'll come to his senses after a while," Hesitantly, she said, "I feel partly responsible because I said I would speak to Tony about the script."

"I know why you didn't," Jake said stiffly. "I don't blame you for setting me up. I deserved worse than I got."

Suddenly shy, Lexie said, "Well, I wanted to come. To see how you were, not just to apologize."

He looked suspicious. "You seemed damned worried about poor little Tony at the Depot."

"So?"

Jake met Lexie's gaze with a deadly stare, then turned away and headed for the kitchen as if too disgusted to look at her any longer.

It dawned on Lexie why Jake was so angry and she hurried after him.

He was removing a tray of ice from the freezer as Lexie entered the kitchen. She pried the ice tray from Jake's hands and moved to the sink. "I'll make an ice pack, all right?"

He stood back and let her have the ice. Archly, he inquired, "Did you take equally good care of Tony before you came up here?"

Lexie sent him a sideways look, almost smiling. "You're jealous, aren't you?"

"Completely." Jake's gaze did not waver, but he was nearly smiling, too. "I want to know what's going on between the two of you."

"Tony and me?" Lexie popped the ice cubes into a dish towel and folded up the corners. She looked at Jake and decided it was time to come clean.

"Look, Tony and I were once very important to each other. I still like him, but I

don't sleep with him."

"Why not? The sex wasn't good enough for you?" he inquired.

Lexie glared at him and shoved the ice pack into his hands. "The sex was fine, thank you. Adequate, at least."

"But it was better with me, is that it?" Jake drawled.

"I didn't say that!" she exclaimed. "I said I don't sleep with Tony now," she repeated, totally exasperated now. "I didn't say why not."

"Okay, I'll bite," Jake said rudely. "Why don't you sleep with Tony, Lex?"

"Because I'm not in love with him," she snapped, not thinking.

"Then why did you sleep with me?"

"I don't know! I just did, that's all. I lost control."

Smiling, he reached out, caught a handful of her coat, and used it to pull her closer. He trapped her there, pinning her hips between his knees and holding her body still while he slid the white coat from her shoulders. "I'm glad you lost control too, Lexie."

He planted a swift, hard kiss on her mouth, a kiss that turned hot and communicative almost at once. He parted her lips and swiped her tongue with his. It was a kiss that provoked a sudden rush of delicious sensual memories. Lexie refrained from throwing her arms around his neck, though she longed to do just that. She did allow herself a sigh against his lips, however, unable to stop herself.

"Mmm," Jake murmured finally, his mouth barely a centimeter from hers. "You've got all kinds of hidden talents, haven't you?"

"Yes, I've got lots of hidden talents you haven't even guessed at yet."

Jake studied her with his good eye for a few silent minutes, as if trying to come to some decision. Finally, he asked, "How are you at reading aloud?"

She met his gaze, eyebrows lifted.



"You need a bedtime story or something?"

"Actually," Jake said slowly, "I'm supposed to be studying tonight."

Lexie blinked, startled. "Studying? You?"

"That commitment I have tomorrow is to take a test."

Lexie stared at him. "What kind of a test?"

Jake took her hand in his and began to lead her back through the kitchen. He brought her into a room she had never seen before. It was at the front of the house, a long, cozy room with yet another fireplace, but with bookshelves built up along each of the four walls. The walls were packed with books!

"Okay, okay," Jake said, seeing the look of amazement on her face. "I'm doing my graduate work at a college about thirty miles from here. My orals are tomorrow."

"What are you studying?"

"Not baseball," he said, laughing at her shock. "I'm working on my Ph.D. in psychology. I've still got a way to go," he added hastily. "There's still the orals tomorrow to get through, and then my thesis, but—"

"My God," Lexie said, staring at him. Jake was clearly a lot smarter than she'd ever given him credit for. "You've made my head spin, all right, Jake. I'm very impressed!"

Jake laughed and gave Lexie a kiss, hugging her hard against his body. "Good," he said over her head. "It's a start, isn't it?"

They reclined together on the sofa in the library with Lexie's back curving warmly into Jake's chest, Lexie read through a list of questions he had handwritten on several pages of a legal-size pad. He seemed able to talk very articulately about each subject listed. He was a smart fellow, indeed, Lexie con-

cluded.

At ten o'clock, he let out a big yawn and Lexie turned in his arms to ask what time he had to take his test.

"I've got to be up by six," he said gathering her close. "There's a half-hour drive, and a quick meeting with my adviser before the orals."

Just then the telephone rang. He dumped her off the sofa and went to answer it, laughing at Lexie's squeal of outrage. The phone had been ringing all night, in fact, so Lexie wasn't worried about one more interruption. It seemed that most of Jake's friends knew his orals were scheduled for the following morning, and they were calling to wish him luck.

When Jake picked up the telephone this time, though, he sounded different, more serious. He listened and glanced at his watch and said, "All right. Yes. Give me ten minutes, okay? Stay there. I'll come get you."

Lexie stayed cross-legged on the floor, looking up at Jake as he put down the receiver. "What was that about?"

"Lex, I've got to go out. I'm sorry."

"Where are you going?"

"It's one of my girl friends. I've got to pick her up."

"One of your *girl friends*? What's going on, Shepard?"

He came over and ruffled her hair with his hand. He tipped up her chin for a quick kiss, then said, "I will explain, I promise, but not yet. Why don't you hop into bed and I'll wake you up when I get back?"

"Why won't you tell me what's going on for once? I hate these secrets of yours!"

He kissed her again, then smiled into her eyes and said, "I love it when you get angry. Seethe for a while and you'll be really hot by the time I get back."

He really was leaving! Heading for the

closet and his coat without another word of explanation! Lexie heard the door close behind him, and then all was silence.

Lexie fumed, stalking around Jake's apartment watching the clock. Twelve-thirty came and went. Lexie was tired, but she didn't want to go to bed before Jake came back. She flopped onto the couch and tried to hold off the exhaustion that fogged her brain. Before she could stop herself, however, she fell asleep.

She woke briefly, and was barely conscious of Jake carrying her to bed, stripping off her clothes, and dumping her into the sheets without much ceremony. Soon she felt his bare skin very warm against hers, and then she lost consciousness once more.

In the morning, he didn't even bother trying to wake her.

Lexie finally dragged herself out of the blackness and managed to open one eye long enough to glare at the bedside clock: 11 a.m. Jake must have gone to his test hours ago!

Lexie knew it was time to get up. Grumpily, she dragged herself to the bathroom. She had just gotten out of the shower when the downstairs doorbell rang.

Lexie froze in the middle of the bedroom floor, wrapped only in a towel. Who could be calling on Jake at this hour?

Whoever it was knew exactly where Jake kept his key. In another moment, there were footsteps on the stairs—lots of footsteps! Hastily, Lexie grabbed her clothes and dove into them.

Emerging from the bedroom in her jeans and sweater, but no shoes, she came face to face with Ted Ormsby, who was just entering the apartment. Behind Ted were half a dozen other people she didn't know—all carrying brown paper bags and six-packs of beer.

Embarrassed at having been caught *en*

*deshabillee* yet again, this time by Ted and a bunch of Jake's friends, Lexie said, "Hello, Ormsby. What's going on? Jake's not here."

"I know," Ted said cautiously. "We're here to surprise Jake when he gets back."

Ted stepped back to allow the whole group to see Lexie and also to give himself some running room in case she decided to attack him. "This is—uh—Lexie Celestine, everybody. Lexie, these are some friends of Jake's. Mia and Phil, Elsie and Leo. Marty, Dennis. Who else? Oh, and Ginny."

A chorus of hellos followed, and Lexie smiled mechanically, feeling both angry and foolish at the same time. She collected herself, though she knew she was blushing. "Hi, everybody," she said uneasily, shoving her hands into the front pockets of her jeans. "It looks like you're planning a party."

"Exactly," said the young woman right behind Ted. "I'm Mia Talusky, and this is my husband, Phil. We thought we'd surprise Jake after his orals. You know, with a party. Can we come in?"

"Sure come in," Lexie declared, and stepped back to let the rest of the gang in to Jake's apartment.

Ted was in charge, it seemed, with Mia second in command. The group split up quickly, making hasty preparations for the party, laughing and talking all at the same time. Mia took over the kitchen, and she and Phil started setting out the food and drinks.

Mia was mixing dip and Phil was stacking beer cartons in the refrigerator. Mia looked up at Lexie's entrance. "Gee, I hope we're not spoiling any plans you might have had with Jake, Lexie."

Shaking her head, Lexie said truthfully, "A few hours ago, I was all set to strangle him as soon as he walked in the door."

Mia laughed. "Don't let us stop you! Some of us might even cheer. We're not only Jake's friends, we have to put up with him at work too."

"Jake hasn't told me much about his work."

Mia nodded. "That's Jake all right. He's never one to spill his life's story. We work together at Welcome House, a social-service agency. Marty and I are counselors at the center, Elsie works in the office—"

"And Jake?" Lexie asked.

"Oh," Mia said without batting an eye, "he's the director."

"The director?" Lexie repeated, astonished.

"Sure." Mia poured the dip into the dish. "He runs the agency. He's our boss."

Amazed, Lexie stared at Mia. Jake had indeed been keeping secrets from her. No wonder he was working on his Ph.D.

Mia must have noticed Lexie's look of surprise, because she studied her from the corner of her eye for a moment. "Jake's been the director of Welcome House for a couple of years. It's a center for domestic violence. We provide counseling, financial support, legal services, that kind of stuff. And we have a house, a shelter for families in transition. Mostly, it's for battered women."

"Battered women!" Lexie repeated, as all the pieces began to fit together.

Mia nodded. "We serve an unbelievable number of families. Women can call our twenty-four-hour switchboard, and one of us will pick them up and take them to the shelter."

So that explained it. Jake was in the business of helping battered women. The late-night phone calls from his "girl friends" were calls for help. Suddenly, she also understood Jake's objection to the Lite Lager commercial. Of course he didn't want to promote violence.

"Jake's concern about domestic violence has a personal origin," Mia was saying. "Before his parents got divorced, his father used to push his mother around a bit. As Jake got older, he wouldn't stand for it, and Wayne blamed Jake when his mother finally got the courage to leave. But I guess you know all about the feud."

From the other room, Ted suddenly shouted, "Hurry up in there! I can see the truck coming!"

"Hey, here he comes!" Ginny yelled. "He's parking the truck!"

Already they could hear the door opening down at the portico. A second later, there were footsteps on the stairs. Mia grabbed the tray and hurried into the living room. From the other room came a chorus of *shhh's*!

Jake opened the door and came in.

Lexie sat still on the stool, knowing her eyes were wide and her face was showing too many emotions. Jake came in but didn't notice her right away. Even before he closed the door behind himself, he called, "Lex? Where are you?"

She took a deep breath and said, "Right here."

He crossed directly into the kitchen, forgetting about hanging up his jacket. "Hi," he said, almost breathless, and automatically took her shoulders in his hands.

Fully aware that the crowd in the next room was listening to every word, ready to jump out and yell "Surprise," Lexie hesitated. At any other time, she would have revelled in his touch, savored the feel of his hands steadying her body. Now, however, she felt awkward and silly. Already Jake was reading her expression.

"What's up?" he asked.

"N-nothing." Lexie said. She had better brazen it out she thought, so she asked mockingly, "Did you flunk?"

He slid one hand up into her hair, and said, "Well, I think you owe me some

apologies for your lack of confidence. Can you think of a nice way of saying you're proud of me?"

"Jake!" Lexie objected, knowing exactly what he had in mind. Already he was pulling her off the stool and heading for the bedroom. Lexie began again, "Look, Shepard—"

"SURPRISE!"

Jake jumped as if he'd been shot from a cannon, then swore, making an instinctive grab for Lexie to protect her from the mob that had been hiding in his living room. Everyone burst out laughing at his reaction, and Lexie could feel his heart pounding as he pressed her head against his chest.

"Holy mackerel," he gasped, as his friends surrounded him. "Are you guys crazy?"

"Yep," said Ted, coming up quickly to Jake's side. "We've come to celebrate your orals. You *did* pass?"

"I think so," Jake said, still stunned. "Yes, of course I passed. You guys made me forget already! Lexie, did you know about this?"

"Not until they showed up half an hour ago. Congratulations, Jake." Lexie stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

Mia suddenly shouted, "Come on, everybody, let's dance! I have a feeling this party is going to be a very short one for us!"

Somebody turned up the stereo and at once the place seemed to be jumping with dancing, singing people.

Jake grabbed Lexie's hand and pulled her to his study, leaving the party behind. He closed the door behind them and turned to Lexie, gathering her up in his arms.

"Now," he said in a husky murmur. "Kiss me, Lexie, love."

Lexie stepped close, nestling against Jake's chest, slipping her arms around his shoulders. Jake pulled her body to his and gently kissed her.

Lexie eased away from the kiss, smiling with lips that trembled suddenly. The truth came from within her. "Jake, I'm scared of you even now."

"Why?" he asked softly. "Are you losing control again?"

"Yes. And I think you are too. That's the scary part." She managed a smile. "Neither of us is going to be able to think straight pretty soon."

"Trust me," he murmured, kissing her temple lightly. "Let me think for both of us awhile, okay?"

"Okay. What did you have in mind?"

"Don't go back to New York," Jake said promptly, his voice soft but firm in her ear. "Stay with me, Lexie Celestine. I love you. Come live with me? Okay?"

The question came fast, but so did her answer. Even without consideration, she smiled and said, "Yes."

"And later?"

"What about later?" Lexie asked.

He met her gaze and smiled warmly, knowing she had read his thoughts. "Later I'll want to marry you, Lexie." Raising his eyebrows, he added, "Of course, if you need some convincing..."

Even at the tensest moments, he could be relaxed. This was what it could be like with Jake—teasing that gave way to love-making. Yes she could cope with that. Life with the Good Shepard might be very good indeed. Impulsively, she hugged him. "What do you have in mind?" she asked on a laugh.

"Getting rid of Ted and the rest of them, for starters."

"And then?"

Still smiling, Jake slipped closer to kiss her lips. Softly, he said, "Use your imagination..."

"Mmm," Lexie sighed, closing her eyes and letting Jake gather her in his arms. "I can imagine all kinds of possibilities...but I think I like this reality best of all." ♥

# PASSION'S DANCE

*Even though ballerina Amelia Jorgenson insists she has nothing in common with "dumb jock" Randy Williams, his playful banter and exuberance prove overwhelming. But Amelia's passion for dance proves equally consuming, as she risks everything on one final chance to live a dream.*

— LAUREN FOX —

Amelia's right hand moved with a ballerina's grace as she fed the big printing press, but then the sound of the bell over the shop door shattered her reverie and made her lose her rhythm. "Be with you in a minute," she called, and reaching down, she switched off the motor, letting the press coast to a halt, and turned toward the counter.

The sight of the customer standing there took her breath away. Why she had been

expecting a blushing bride-to-be and a hovering mother she didn't know. Maybe it had been something to do with the prematurely warm spring weather. But *he* was definitely not a bride-to-be. He towered over her—six feet four, at least—and his beautifully tailored three-piece suit did nothing to hide the breadth and strength of his shoulders and chest. His clean-shaven face was evenly tanned, and the first hint of laugh lines bracketed a pair of startling

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blue eyes. Amelia couldn't recall ever having seen anyone so appealing.

Amelia wiped her hands on a clean rag, suddenly conscious of her lack of makeup, her pigtails, the ink under her fingernails.

"I need some business cards printed," he said, sliding one across the counter to her.

"You didn't have this done here, Mr. Williams," she noted as she picked the card up and studied it critically.

"It's Randy," he said. "And, no."

She handed the card back to him with a disdainful look. "My father would roll over in his grave if I produced something this bad."

"You know, I never did really like it," he mused, picking up the card and holding it at arm's length.

"Now, what about your address and phone? Are they right?"

"No." He took a pen from the cup on the counter and changed both the address and telephone number on the card.

"Why, that's right next door."

"Yes. I'm in the office upstairs."

"I'll put this on a vellum card for you—eggshell. Five hundred okay?"

"Fine," he said as he turned and left the shop.

She watched him duck his head to avoid cracking it on the bell. Frowning, she gave the heavy flywheel a push and flipped the switch, but the bell at the door jangled again, announcing the entrance of her doctor. She turned, too quickly, and winced as the pain shot up her right leg.

"Hi, Doc," she said trying not to limp as she crossed to the counter.

"I was on my way home and saw your light," Dr. Benson said. "Thought I'd check up on you."

"I'm fine, as you can see," she said brightly, hoping he'd let it go at that. So her knee hurt a bit. Not even doctors really wanted to hear about every little ache

and pain.

"Let me see a few pirouettes," he countered.

"I'm fine, really," she insisted, as he opened the gate in the counter.

"Uh-huh," he murmured, and she hissed with pain as his fingers probed, pushing at her kneecap. "And I'm Nijinsky. Young lady, if you keep abusing that knee, you're going to wind up on crutches again."

"It's been a year," she protested.

"Ten months. Have you been doing your exercises?"

"Faithfully."

"And nothing extra? No dancing?" he asked skeptically.

"How could I? You told me I'll never dance again," she said innocently.

"You won't even be able to walk if you don't behave yourself," he warned.

"I am. I don't do anything that hurts too much. Truly."

"You still have a dancer's insensitivity to pain," he grumbled. "As soon as it starts to ache, I want you to *sit down!* Hellfire! Look at how swollen it is! You want me to have to drain off the fluid again?"

Amelia shuddered. "No!"

"You've got to keep your weight off that knee. And watch it when you turn."

"I know. Don't pivot, pick up my big feet."

"Right." He glanced at his watch. "I wonder if my other patient is still here this late."

"You have another patient here?"

"Next door, if I got his new address right. Football player by the name of—"

"Randolph Williams," Amelia interrupted. Her opinion of Randy plunged.

"You've met him?"

"Yes, and I've been trying to figure out why he looked familiar."

"You two should get along well," the surgeon commented. "You can share



your two good pins and hobble down the street like you were in a three-legged race."

"You're all heart, you know that, Doc?"

"I like working with the handicapped," he retorted.

"Good night, sawbones," she replied, and after he had left, she limped over to do some type sorting. Her knee wasn't hurting too badly, and she really did have a lot of work to do. By leaning her elbow against the edge of the rack she could balance on one leg, her throbbing knee slightly bent, just her toe touching the floor.

When she finished sorting, she limped over to get the next galley. She was halfway back across the shop when the bell chimed, and she turned too suddenly, pivoting on the wrong leg. A bolt of pain tore through her knee and it gave way entirely. She heard the metal tray hit the floor, heard the type skipping across the linoleum. She almost saved herself on the corner of the type case, but her hand slipped and she went down heavily, her head just missing the flywheel of the press.

Curling herself into an agonized ball, she held her knee, cursing softly, fighting to control the tears of pain.

"On your back," someone ordered, rolling her away from the printing press. There was type under her shoulders, hard and sharp, like bits of gravel, but the discomfort of that was nothing compared to the pain in her knee. Through her tears she saw a tanned face with intense blue eyes looking down at her.

"Thank God," Randy sighed as he surveyed her. "I thought you'd hit your head."

"My knee," Amelia managed through clenched teeth.

"I'll see if I can catch the doctor."

"No, don't!" she cried, grabbing his arm. Dr. Benson would be furious with

her. "It's getting better."

"I can imagine."

"Really, *please* don't get him. I'll be all right in a minute." Hoping he wouldn't notice, she used the back of one hand to wipe her tears away. He didn't say anything, just put one of his arms around her shoulders and cradled her to him. When she finally stopped crying, he eased her down to the hard floor and stripped off his suit jacket, folded it into a pillow, and slipped it under her head.

"Let's see what we've got here," he said, lifting her knee.

"Do you know what you're doing?" she demanded, her voice ragged with pain.

"I should. I've had enough experience," he answered, gently straightening her leg. "Football players know all about knee injuries. Now, try to relax."

She felt strangely detached from her leg as he carefully manipulated it. She groaned softly when he flexed her knee and twisted her foot, but not even the pain could obliterate the pleasure she felt from the touch of his hands on her skin.

"I remember when the trainer was doing this to me," Randy noted calmly. "I could have told him right then that my playing days were over." He sat back, easing her leg down to the floor. "I don't think it's too bad."

She sat up, too suddenly, and the shop spun around her. "I'm sure it's fine," she said bravely, and blinked at the spots dancing before her eyes.

"Lie back down," he ordered, giving her a gentle shove. "You've had quite a shock, and I don't need you passing out on me. Makes for a very dull conversation. I was going to try to talk you into having dinner with me, but what you need right now is to get home."

"I can walk."

"No, you can't."

"I only live upstairs."

"Even worse. Stairs would finish you. Where are they?"

"Off the storeroom in back."

"Stay put," he ordered, getting up. She heard him lock the door and flip the sign over. She sat up as he came through the gate in the counter. He had only the faintest hint of a limp and moved lightly, with an easy grace. She'd always thought of football players as clumsy and awkward.

Amelia couldn't help wondering what Randy thought of her apartment as he deposited her on the sofa. The open windows across the front let in a soft wash of late evening light. He went into the kitchen and she recognized the clunk and rattle of ice cubes. He reappeared at her side with a towel in an untidy wad and began to wrap it around her knee.

"I don't need ice now," she said.

"Do as you're told," he ordered. "And if you don't, I'll call Dr. Benson."

Glancing at the wall of mirrors across the wide room, she shifted uncomfortably as he looked around her sparsely furnished apartment. It was one huge space—living room, bedroom, and dining room in one. This was the first time she'd had a guest here since moving in six months before.

"What was this, anyway?" he asked.

"A ballet school."

He studied her speculatively. "You're a dancer."

"Ballerina," she corrected. Her knee was starting to ache from the cold, but the way he was sprawled on the sofa she couldn't sit up to remove the ice pack.

"How about some supper?"

"Got your way at last, didn't you?" she asked, smiling. "Help yourself. There must be something in the refrigerator."

In half an hour he had her propped up and eating a cheese omelette, her knee still wrapped in ice.

"You know, it seems strange, you living here," he commented. "It must be kind of painful, being constantly reminded of the world you've left behind."

"It doesn't bother me," she answered quickly, ignoring his assumption that she had given up dance. "Don't you still enjoy going to football games?"

He shook his head. "Can't stand it."

"I thought ex-football players became television announcers. What do they call them? Color men?"

"Some do," he replied. "The ones who have the talent, or the fame to make up for talent. Usually they're the ones who retire voluntarily, when they've gotten too old to play."

"You're not too old to play?"

"No. I'm thirty-two," he answered easily. "If my own pulling guard hadn't landed on me, I could have played another five years—maybe more."

"I could dance another ten years—maybe fifteen," Amelia noted defiantly.

"We're a real pair," he observed, as if ignoring her comment. "Both of us in professions with short life spans to begin with, and we shorten them even further. What were you going to do when you had to retire?"

"Teach dancing, raise a flock of kids. Except..."

"Except what?"

"Uh, nothing." He didn't need to know she was divorced. "What about you? Were you going to coach?"

"As a matter of fact, I was. I had it all laid out. I'd retire when I was at my peak, and slide into a nice cushy job as offensive backfield coach. Then in ten years I'd be head honcho of my old team. How did you get into printing?"

"I inherited all the printing stuff. It was my father's."

"Was?"

"He died six months ago, just after my di—"

"Divorce?" Randy said when her voice broke off.

She was furious with herself for the slip. "Yeah," she admitted. "Jose was a dancer, too. It just didn't work out."

"I'm sorry."

"About my father? Or the divorce?"

"Both," he answered calmly. "The last year must have been pretty tough on you."

"It's had its ups and downs."

"Well, here's to a better future," he said.

The next afternoon in the shop Amelia was sitting on a stool, which wasn't quite tall enough, and she had to stretch uncomfortably to reach the numbers at the top of the case.

The doorbell chimed, and she glanced up at the clock. "Hi, Carol," she said, greeting her apprentice cheerily.

"*Guess who's in town?*" the effervescent fifteen-year-old bubbled, slamming her schoolbooks onto the shelf and slipping an apron on over her head.

"Who?"

"Randy Williams, the football player! He bought a big house down on the harbor. He's going to live *right here!*"

Amelia tried not to smile. "Oh, really? Randy Williams? A football player?"

"Not a football player—the all-pro rushing back! He would have set a rushing record last year, but then he tore up his knee."

"I thought you regarded football as gross," said Amelia.

"Football is gross. But Randy Williams isn't."

"Could you proof this?" Amelia asked casually, handing the girl the heavy composing stick.

"Randolph Williams, Investment Counselor, Twenty-three-eighteen Boston Post Road..." Carol read slowly. "Right next door? 'Oh, gosh! Oh,

wow! What should I do?"

"You should sort that mess over there in the galley," Amelia ordered. "I'm sorry about the dust and dirt. I had to sweep it up off the floor this morning. I wrenched my knee, took a tumble, and dropped a galley."

"What happened to your knee?" Carol asked.

"Oh, I just twisted it. Thanks to Randy Williams, as a matter of fact. I was carrying the galley, and he came in, and I whirled around, and that did it."

"You mean you fell at his feet?"

"Not exactly. He was on the other side of the counter."

"Well, what did he do?" Carol asked impatiently.

"He leaped across the counter."

"Randy Williams leaped over the counter to rescue you? Did he kiss you?"

"Carol! That is quite enough on the subject of Randy Williams," Amelia said severely, not really angry. She tried not to show any shock at Carol's uninhibited chatter. The girl was young and full of life, and the two of them hit it off well. There was an intimacy between them that Amelia had missed with her own family. She was an only child and her father had been shy and reserved. Her mother had been a moderately successful dancer until a heart condition ended her career. At that point Amelia had begun her own serious ballet studies. She had always wondered about the timing and the fact that shortly after Amelia's first solo in *Giselle*, her mother had died.

"What would you do if you met him?" Amelia asked, catching sight of Randy through the window. He was heading in their direction.

"Kiss him!"

"Well, here's your chance," Amelia announced as Randy reached the door.

"Yikes!" Carol squealed, ducking down behind the counter. She huddled

there, frowning up at Amelia.

"Good afternoon," Randy said. "How's your knee today?"

"Pretty good," Amelia assured him, trying not to smile as she glanced at Carol crouched before her. "I'm resting it. It's fine. See?" She swung her leg out.

"Can you get around?"

"Slowly." Carol was pressing a finger under her nose, her face screwed up as she tried not to sneeze. Amelia bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

"What are you laughing about?" he asked. "Surely, my presence isn't *that* amusing."

Just then, Carol sneezed. Mortified, she curled up into a ball and put her face in her hands. Randy leaned over the counter and peered down at her.

"Hello there!"

Carol looked up. "Uh, hi. I'm—checking supplies."

"Oh, really?" he said dryly. "I thought they were kept in the supply room in back."

Carol got to her feet, blushing furiously and dusting her hands off. "Oh, yeah, so they are. I'll leave you two alone—together that is—just the two of you. 'Scuse me."

"That's Carol," Amelia explained. "She's my part-time assistant. You took her by surprise?"

"I see," said Randy, looking only slightly puzzled.

"Your cards won't be ready until Saturday. I just finished setting the type."

"I really just came to see how you are, and to ask you to dinner."

Out of the corner of her eye, Amelia saw Carol come back into the shop and stand there, watching them curiously.

"I stay open late today," said Amelia.

"I can handle the shop," Carol offered promptly.

"You go home and have dinner with your family and do your homework,"

Amelia ordered.

"How late are you open?" Randy asked.

"Nine o'clock," Carol said. "And she can't resist pasta, even when she's dieting, which is all the time."

"I didn't say I'd go," Amelia protested.

"She will," Carol said. "I'll work on her for you."

"You do that," Randy approved. "I'll see you, at nine," he told Amelia.

"I am *not* going to dinner with him," Amelia insisted after Randy had left.

"Why not? Dating now and then would be good for you," Carol demanded.

"Me, go out with a sweaty jock?"

"I'm sure even his sweat is beautiful!" Carol sighed. "Besides, dancers sweat, too. And it'll be the first time you've been out on a date since...." Carol's voice trailed off.

"Since my divorce became final," Amelia finished.

"I know you don't like to talk about it," Carol said timidly.

"You're right," Amelia agreed. "I don't even like to think about it. But maybe you're right, maybe I should have a date now and then. Now, why don't you get out of here and let me concentrate on something useful, like printing, okay?"

"Okay."

Amelia turned the radio on. *Les Sylphides* was playing. She was pleased to note that the local public radio station was playing a lot of ballet music lately. It shortened the lonely hours.

Later at the Italian restaurant Randy insisted on, the aromas broke down Amelia's resolve to restrain herself. Instead of the salad she'd planned on, she ordered a platter of fettuccini and a side dish of eggplant parmigiana. Randy ate enough veal scallopini, spaghetti, salad,

eggplant, and garlic bread for three people.

"I like a woman who enjoys eating," he said. "It shows she appreciates the pleasures of the flesh."

"Oh, really?" Amelia retorted. "You seem quite addicted to the pleasures of the flesh yourself."

"That's what makes us such a good match," he answered, grinning wickedly.

"We don't have *anything* in common."

"We both like to eat," he argued, waving to the waitress and pantomiming an order for coffee. "And I bet we both like to sail."

"Do you sail? Is that why you moved to Larchmont?"

"I'm just learning, as a matter of fact."

"I hear you bought quite a spread on the harbor," Amelia observed.

"You hear a lot, for someone who never gets out."

"Who says I never get out?" Amelia demanded, stung.

"Just a guess," he answered, smiling. Amelia wished he wouldn't smile—it got her all rattled.

Picking up the bill, he ran his eye down it, then counted out some money and put it on the table. "Let's get out of here."

As Amelia stood up, her heart suddenly quickened and both her knees felt shaky.

"Are you up to a bit of a walk?"

"I think so," she decided.

"Well, if you collapse, I'll carry you back to my cave," he answered, his hands lingering on her shoulders for half a dozen heartbeats as he helped her with her sweater. Neither his words nor his actions did anything to improve the rubbery state of her legs.

He drove to a park that overlooked Long Island Sound and as they strolled under the towering horse chestnut trees, he tucked her arm through his.

"I've heard parks aren't safe after

dark," she commented.

"Shucks, you're with me."

"That's what I mean," she answered nervously as they came to the stone seawall. He guided her along it to a point of land between harbor and sound.

"Is that so?" He freed his arm from her grasp, lifted her easily, and set her down on the wall facing him.

Amelia steadied herself with her hands on his shoulders for a moment, then rested her palms on the gritty stones. They were still warm from their day in the sun.

Randy was silhouetted against the lights of the harbor, the moon a half-circle in the sky above him.

He ran his fingers over her shoulders and down her arms, then slid his hands around her waist.

"Now, don't you go picking me up again!" She laughed uneasily, her voice echoing back at them from the trees. Out on the water a bell buoy clanged discordantly.

"I wasn't going to," he assured her.

"What were you going to do?" she asked, her throat aching.

"This," he answered, leaning toward her, and his lips touched hers, gently, warmly, enticingly.

As the kiss went on, and on, and on, his hands slid upward and his fingers sank into the soft flesh of her back.

Suddenly a light hit them almost like a physical blow, jarring them apart. "All right, boys and girls, let's break it up," a man's voice rumbled out of the darkness.

Randy turned on the shadowy figure with ominous quickness.

"Oh, Mr. Williams, I didn't realize it was you," the policeman said quickly. Amelia blinked against the glare as she was spotlighted briefly. "Miss Jorgenson."

"Okay," Randy growled. "You've taken the damn census now!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Williams," the

policeman apologized, killing the flashlight. "But the parks are closed after ten. I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave. We get trouble down here sometimes — It's for your own protection."

Randy lifted Amelia off the wall. "I hope you'll forget who it was you found down here," he said to the policeman. "I don't want Miss Jorgenson's name showing up in that column of police news they put in the paper every morning."

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't believe I caught your name," the policeman responded as he got back in his car.

Randy pulled Amelia close, his touch firm and comforting. "Want to go somewhere else?"

"Like a pair of teenagers, looking for a place to neck?" she asked sardonically.

"We could go to my place," he suggested. "Or yours."

"I don't think so," she answered shakily.

"Damn! One of my best seductions, down the tubes," he grumbled. "Want to try it again sometime?"

"Only if you'll guarantee a cop will come in and rescue me at the last minute!"

"I can't guarantee that, but how about if I pick you up at two o'clock tomorrow for a sail?" he asked as they walked to the car.

Amelia looked at him closely as he linked his fingers with hers. "OK, it's a deal," she said.

The next day, Amelia saw that Randy's little boat was tied up at a small dock behind his house, a trim white stucco with a red tile roof.

They climbed in and Randy dictated a steady stream of instructions that Amelia nervously tried to follow, and they managed to maneuver—"not graceful, but not bad," as Randy said—around the harbor.

Suddenly, a blast of wind hit the sail, and before she realized what had happened the boat had capsized.

An hour later Amelia was in Randy's bathroom, sipping brandy, waiting for the shower water to get hot and her clothes to dry. She looked in the mirror and frowned.

Billows of steam fogged her reflection. She adjusted the temperature and stepped under the scalding spray. Tipping her head back, she let the hot water wash down over her face as she unbraided her long blond hair and let it stream down her back. She thought of Randy, and her stomach tightened.

She wondered what was going to happen. He was such a perfect specimen. The mere thought of his sheer animal magnetism made her knees go weak.

But there had to be more than that. What about love? What about caring, sharing, and commitment? She'd had all those things with Jose. They had danced together, traveled together. They had been the darlings of the dance set, the perfect match.

Fat lot of good that had done, she told herself acidly, and determinedly shutting her ex-husband out of her mind, she turned off the water and groped for a towel. After wrapping her hand turbanlike in the towel, she put on Randy's voluminous terrycloth robe, and made her way down the stairs to the living room. A fire was crackling cheerily in the fireplace, and soft music floated out from concealed speakers. She walked over to the picture window that overlooked the small lawn and the harbor. She heard Randy coming down the stairs, but didn't turn. When his hands touched her shoulders, slid down her arms, and went around her waist, she snuggled back against him.

"Enjoying the view?" he asked.

"It's lovely," she said, gently disengaging herself from him and moving away



from the window, nearer to the fire.

"Do you have a comb I could use?" she asked.

He went into another room and returned with a small comb.

"Have you known many women?" she asked solemnly, unwinding the towel from around her hair. Folding her legs under her, she sank with her back to the fire. She straightened her bad knee, revealing an immodest expanse of thigh.

"A few," he said. "What about you?" He sat down on the sofa, watching her comb her hair. "What happened to your marriage?"

"My husband ran off with someone else after I hurt my knee."

"Nice guy."

"He had his moments," she noted dryly, wondering at her willingness to share things with Randy.

"Are you still in love with him?"

"No."

"Well, that's a relief!"

"Why?"

"I can't stand competition. Tell me how you got into dancing," he said.

Amelia swept her hair back over her shoulders. "My mother was a dancer."

"What's she doing now?"

"She's dead."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks. It was years ago. I think her heart started to give out when she realized her own career was over. She lived just long enough to see me dance my first solo."

"So, all you've done is dance."

"It was all I had time for. You have to concentrate if you're going to be successful. I wanted to be successful."

"It sounds worse than football."

"Well, at least I don't go around crashing into people."

"I hated crashing into people."

"Really?" She looked up at him in surprise. "I thought—"

"Dump jock?" he filled in.

"I wasn't going to say that! I was going to say I thought you loved physical contact."

"Physical contact is one thing, but crashing into people is another. Crashing into people hurts."

"I thought that was the object of football."

"My object was to make a buck and keep myself in one piece. There was nothing I liked better than stepping out of bounds or into the end zone before some gorilla could pulverize me."

"So, what happened?"

"We were running a simple trap, and the guard who pulled got blocked into me, closing up the hole and closing out my career at the same time."

"Did you have anything to fall back on?"

"An education, thank God. Excuse me a minute while I move our stuff to the dryer."

Closing her eyes for a moment, she tried to relax the tensions that were tying her up like knots in a tightened string. The fire was hot against her back. She turned to stare into the dancing flames and rested a cheek against her raised knee. For some reason she felt melancholy, and alone, and a little lost—adrift and unsure of herself—as if she had lost her place in the choreography.

Randy came back and offered to cook some steaks for them both, and when they were ready Amelia attacked her portion with glee. It had been a long time since she'd had steak.

"That was delicious," she said at last, her plate polished clean. She finished her wine and sat back contentedly. "I really enjoyed it."

"I never would have guessed," he said.

"Let me help," she offered as he started to clear the plates, and her tension had returned by the time everything was in

the sink. She wiped her hands nervously on a dishtowel and wandered into the living room, back to the window.

Outside, it was getting dark. Rain slanted downward, making the water look like beaten metal. A few gulls rode the waves, bobbing uneasily on the choppy swells. Amelia shivered, remembering the cold water. She rubbed her arms through the thick terry cloth.

"Quite a change from earlier this afternoon, I must say," Randy commented as he came up behind her. His arms went around her, and she snuggled into the warmth of his embrace. She had the feeling nothing could harm her while she was in his arms. Except him.

But maybe there wasn't anything to be afraid of. She leaned back against his solid bulk. Behind her, soft jazz came from the radio and in front of her rain rattled against the glass.

His hands moved down her arm, to the belt of the robe. Her heart quickened, it's beat progressing from a waltz to a tarantella. She swallowed tightly as he slowly undid the belt. She closed her eyes, trying to shut out all her misgivings and fears. Her knees were weak, and she felt as if she were quivering with stage fright.

The belt loosened and she held the robe closed with her arms. Ghostlike, she could see her reflection in the window, the huge robe swaddling her, the belt dangling at her sides. Randy towered behind her, over her, like a colossus. His face was shadowy and mysterious, his dark eyes unreadable.

His fingers took her wrists gently, and he unfolded her arms. She had no strength, and let him place her arms at her sides. The robe, her only covering, hung heavily around her.

His arms surrounded her again, only this time one hand slid under the nubbly material. Gently, he pushed the robe aside. Air touched her skin as the robe slid open.

He opened the robe farther, and she saw her entire body reflected in the window. The shadowy parts were invisible, while the lighted parts, the curve of breasts and thigh, seemed suspended in space before them. She reached up and grabbed his wrists to stop him from removing the only physical barrier between them.

"Randy," she began, her voice cracking. "I'm scared."

To her relief, he didn't try to go any further. But he didn't back off either. He kept his grip on the robe, kept his hands on her slight shoulders.

"It's not you," she moaned, trying to understand herself. Her voice was sour and sharp with unhappiness. "I think it's just too soon after the divorce. I'm not ready."

"Relax and you will be."

"No." She tightened her grip on his wrists as he started to move. "Please, let go. Please?"

"I'm not going to force you," he said quietly. And she knew that the moment had passed, that she was safe, that he wouldn't persist. She felt sad, hollow, bitter, as if she had just been cheated. But she knew she had cheated herself. There was no one else to blame.

The rain had washed the air clean. Bright sun sparkled down on the early Monday morning traffic. It was the kind of spring day that followed a rain, that brought the grass and flowers up in a rush. Sitting on her stool at work, Amelia began lifting her leg, beginning her leg exercises. Her knee was getting better every day. She could now run through the five positions without any pain at all—almost.

She finished her exercises, then began gathering up and boxing the jobs she had printed on Friday and Saturday. As she passed the radio she turned it on, and absently pirouetted to the music. Her

knee gave a warning spasm. "Gently," she told herself grimly. "It's going to take time."

"Good morning," Randy greeted her from the door, his tone friendly but also cautious.

"Hi," she said curtly, not looking up.

"How was your Sunday?"

"Dry." She had spent it getting her head together, getting her priorities straight. She couldn't afford to let his presence sidetrack her. There wasn't enough time for him, or anything else, except dancing. "Here are your cards." She slid the box of cards over to him. "I'm sorry about Saturday, I shouldn't have given you the wrong impression," she said stiffly. "I didn't mean to lead you on. I'm not a tease."

"I never said you were." He seemed very calm.

"What do you want from me?" she said.

"Respect," he answered without a moment's hesitation.

"Well, you've got it," she snapped.

"You're a lousy liar."

"I do respect you," she insisted. "And I respect myself."

"Too much to go to bed with a dumb jock," he retorted, his voice still remarkably soft in spite of the harsh words.

"That's not it at all."

"Okay. Then what is it?"

She didn't answer, didn't look up, knowing how those intense blue eyes could penetrate, hypnotize.

"You've been swathed in that unreal world of yours for so long, you don't know how to relate to anyone who can't dance. You don't know what a date is. If something isn't all choreographed for you, you're afraid to make a move. The real world scares you."

"That's not true."

"Prove it," he challenged.

"How?"

"By going out with me again."

"So you can get me in bed?" she fired back.

"So you can learn what it is to want to go to bed with someone," he answered. "Without the violins and the trumpets driving you on. Without Balanchine to direct your every step."

"All right, I will," she exploded angrily.

"Good. I'll pick you up here Friday at seven."

"You devil," she hissed, furious with herself for having fallen into his trap.

"I'll see you at seven," he said, grinning triumphantly. "Dress up a bit—if you've got something other than a tutu in your closet."

Later as Amelia climbed the stairs to her apartment, she thought once again that she didn't have time for a social life. She had to get back in shape. Stripping off her clothes, she got out an old leotard and tights and slipped them on, then added bulky knit warm-up socks and a sweater. She rested her hand on the cool wood of the barre. It was like taking the hand of an old and trusted friend. She arranged her feet carefully, studying their position in the mirror.

The mechanical repetition of the exercise left her mind free to wander back to Randy. Okay. She'd go out with him one more time, just to prove him wrong. Then she'd dump him and go back to dancing. It'd serve him right for being so arrogant. Besides, it might even be fun. She had four days to prepare for the date. She'd knock him dead.

She'd choreograph it all herself, too. There was no reason in the world why she couldn't. *She* wasn't a dump jock, after all.

She tried third position again. Her knee protested when she turned her right foot

out and started to slide it back in. She could do fourth position without too much pain, but fifth was still hopeless.

"It'll come," she told herself, twisting her body from side to side to work out the kinks.

Three nights later Amelia listened with half an ear as Randy ordered, and tried to look absorbed by the panorama of the harbor. They were at the Yacht Club, where he was a member, he said, as a business necessity. A scattering of boats bobbed on the gentle waves, tugging at their moorings. She took a gulp of wine and was delighted to find it was bubbly.

Randy was watching her with obvious desire. "You know," he said, "You seem cool as a cucumber, but there's also a passion in you that's so hot it's frightening. I think it scares you more than it does me. That's why you keep trying to be so controlled."

She tried to still the quivering in her fingers as she turned her glass nervously. "Probably all the years of ballet. It's an age-old regimen developed, perfected, to create control." She said it softly, as much to herself as to him. She had never really thought about it before.

"Go on," he urged when she fell silent.

"You spend years learning to control every muscle in your body. I guess it's bound to carry over into your . . . psychology, if that's the word for it. It takes an incredible amount of discipline."

"How long have you been dancing?"

"Ever since I can remember. I started formal classes when I was five. But I danced even before that. When I was ten I was in a television production of *The Nutcracker*," she went on, grateful for his obvious interest. "Mom moved me to classes in New York City when I was twelve, and I was in corps by the time I was fourteen. I had a small solo in *Swan Lake* at fifteen."

"I'm impressed," he said, sitting back

so the waiter could serve him.

When they had finished their coffee, Randy said, "Come on, let's dance."

Amelia looked away from his face. "I don't know how."

"You're kidding!"

"I studied ballet, not ballroom dancing," she said defensively.

"Come on," he insisted, reaching down to pull her out of her chair. "Just follow my lead and you'll do fine. And if you can't follow, I'll carry you."

He drew her into his arms, and it seemed perfectly natural. Her feet took up the rhythm. She let him draw her close, resting her cheek on his chest as he towered over her. It seemed almost as if she were a child dancing with a grown-up. Only her feelings were anything but childlike. He was strong, and sure on his feet. She felt as if she were floating on a cloud.

"Do you have any idea how much I envy you?" he asked.

"You? Envy me?" she asked.

"All your life you've been creating. You've produced beauty where they was nothing before."

"But it doesn't last."

"Yes, it does—in the minds of the people who've been lucky enough to see it."

Embarrassed by his admiration, she avoided his glance, "Have you ever been to a ballet?" she asked and changed the subject.

"No. It always seemed kind of silly to me, a bunch of people wearing long underwear, jumping around to music."

"It ranks right up there with a mob of armored dinosaurs crashing into each other on a patch of grass," she retorted.

He laughed, and then he was silent for a moment, holding her close as they swayed to the music. "I wish I'd seen you dance."

"You still can, if you want to."

"You really think you'll be able to dance again?"

"What's Dr. Benson been telling you?" she asked.

"Nothing," Randy assured her. "But I got the impression you did a worse job on your knee than I did on mine."

"I am going to dance again," she insisted.

"I'm not trying to discourage you—" he said softly.

"Let's not talk about it anymore," she cut him off. "Okay?" Fear had chilled her, and she huddled against him, trying to drive it away, abandoning herself to the pleasure of being in his arms. His thighs brushed hers intimately and she felt herself being pressed closer, until they were moving as one in a world of their own. He didn't release her when the music changed to a fast beat, but picking up the tempo, he led her expertly.

When the music stopped, she looked around and joined in the dutiful applause. She felt as if she were emerging from a daze, and, enjoying the feel of his arms around her, let Randy guide her from the dance floor.

"Why don't we go back to my house now?" he suggested before they reached their table.

"All right," she agreed, suddenly wanting to be away from the crowd. What was happening to her? Something very special that she didn't want anyone but him to see. As he draped the shawl over her shoulders, his hands on her bare skin sent little sparks of excitement coursing through her.

At his house he helped her from the car. "Let's not go inside," she whispered, suddenly uneasy at the thought of being trapped, closed in.

"All right," he agreed. He slid his arm around her and led her into the back yard. She saw his little sailboat bobbing and dancing on the moonlit waves, tugging at its mooring as if impatient to be free.

They walked down to the low retaining

wall that separated the lawn from the beach. She suddenly had an urge to feel the sand between her toes and kicked off her shoes. Discreetly turning away from him, she rolled her stockings down and tossed them aside.

Tucking her skirt under her, she sat on the wall and wriggled her toes in the sand. The surface was cool, while the sun's heat lingered beneath.

He sat down beside her, and she began to have trouble breathing. He put his hand on her knee. "You've got beautiful legs," he said softly.

"They're much too muscular," she protested.

"They're not as bad as mine. I have an awful time finding slacks that fit. I wear an ascot because I've got such a big neck a tie looks ridiculous." His fingers stroked her leg, slipped under the hem of her skirt with insolent skill.

She tilted her head back and welcomed his approaching kiss. It sent a blaze of fire surging through her. His fingers stroked gently, teasingly, and all the strength drained out of her. She was tilting backward, yielding to the pressure of his mouth on hers. He picked her up and carried her to the lawn, and the grass was cool and damp against her back.

She didn't even think, about her clothes—or his. All she knew was that she wanted him.

His hand slid up her thighs, and her legs opened instinctively. She arched against him, wrapped her arms around his torso. He touched her intimately. She moaned and melted against him.

She felt him exploring the lacy barricade of her panties. Lifting her hips, she let him remove them, as she felt herself dissolving in a haze of pleasure and passion.

He broke their kiss, and gazed down at her. She stared up into his shadowy face as he loomed above her, and let all the

hunger and need show in her eyes.

"You're so tiny," he whispered softly, fearfully.

"Don't worry about it."

Anxiously, hungrily, she helped him off with his pants. They were both too eager to bother with undressing further.

He moved more gently now, carefully, carrying his weight on his arms. She hugged him to her, and he seemed to fill her completely.

It went on and on and on, until she cried ecstatically. She clung to him as if he were a cliff and she were about to fall off. She whimpered, cried out again, found his mouth and locked her lips to his.

When it was over and the world stopped rocking, she nestled against him, savoring the feeling of warmth and security. For a long time they lay there, the wavelets of the harbor gently patting the beach. Somewhere out in the darkness a seagull complained shrilly.

When she began shivering he swept her up in his arms and carried her to the house. Up in his bedroom, illuminated only by the moonlight that spilled in through the window, he set her down and undressed her as tenderly as if she were an infant. And then they both finally faded into deep, deep sleep.

From the front seat of Randy's car, Amelia looked nervously up and down the street, conscious of his amusement as he waited behind the wheel. The Saturday morning traffic was light, but down the block a few early risers picking up morning papers wandered in and out of the tobacco shop. She waited until the coast was clear.

"It looks like I'm getting home after a night of debauchery."

He grinned at her. "Aren't you?"

"You should know!" She turned and kissed him with hungry ferocity. Then she whirled around, jumped out of the car,

and prepared to sprint for the print shop.

"Don't forget we're going sailing this afternoon."

"Who could forget?" she asked. In a weaker moment she'd agreed to a repeat performance.

"Certainly not I," he said. "See you at three."

"Right," she agreed, and hurried up to the shop.

Just as she was about to unlock the door, it was jerked open from inside. "What are you doing here?" Amelia cried.

"I work here on Saturdays. Remember?" Carol said cheerily. "My don't you look—"

"One more word and you're fired," Amelia warned.

Carol's eyes sparkled wickedly as she tried to assume a look of innocence. "I was just going to say you look lovely."

"I'm going to go change," Amelia announced haughtily, trying to ignore the blush that was heating her cheeks. Assuming a grand manner, she swept through the gate in the counter and up the stairs.

She studied herself intently in the mirror when she reached her apartment, touching her cheeks. Where was the glow coming from? Her hair was down, the soft feathery tendrils tickling her back. Randy had combed it out for her as they'd lounged in bed that morning. The black dress looked ludicrous in the morning brightness. Her legs were bare, her stockings undoubtedly claimed by the tide.

Turning away from the mirror, she reached for the zipper of her dress and wished Randy was there to do it for her. But if he were, she knew she'd never make it down to the print shop.

"Coffee?" Carol asked when Amelia returned. "I, uh, liberated the pot from your kitchen and brought it down here. I thought maybe you'd want some when

you got home.”

“Didn’t it occur to you that I might just be sleeping late this morning? *Here?*” Amelia asked as she poured herself a cup of coffee.

“It occurred to me. I opened the door real quietly and peeked in to make sure. But I really didn’t think you’d be here. Linda Robey’s mom called my mom this morning and said she’d seen you with Randy Williams at the Yacht Club last night. She said the two of you looked real, uh, friendly.”

“Oh Lord,” Amelia groaned. She had visions of Carol’s mother storming into the shop, dragging her daughter away from the evil influence there.

Well, there was no point in trying to pretend that nothing had happened. She hadn’t felt so contented and fulfilled since her injury.

Finishing her coffee, Amelia tried to settle down to work. She rolled up the top of the old desk and got out her checkbook and the stack of bills. The first one she came to was for business cards, vellum...Randy’s.

Chewing thoughtfully on the pen, she remembered how they had played together in the morning light. Shameless, that’s what they were. She felt her cheeks flaming, and glanced around in time to catch Carol’s eye.

“So, when are you going to start on the wedding invitations?” Carol asked.

“Who said anything about getting married?” Amelia asked, surprised.

“Well...I mean, I, uh—I thought that was the normal course of events, after two people, uh...”

“Marriage is not in the works.”

“He doesn’t want to?”

“The subject hasn’t come up. Besides, I don’t want to,” Amelia said firmly. “I’m going to dance. And I can’t do that and keep a marriage together, too.”

“But what if—”

“There aren’t any ‘what ifs,’” Amelia interrupted. “Got that?”

Later that afternoon Amelia was ready early, and was pacing the sidewalk when Randy finally arrived. He had the top down, and the minute he stopped the car she got into the front seat, leaned over, and kissed him. It started out as just a friendly, hello kiss, but rapidly changed into something else.

“I must say, this is a nice change!” Randy said, looking pleased but puzzled.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, until yesterday, you didn’t even want to go out with me.”

“That was before I knew how a date with you would turn out,” she said with a grin, resting her hand on his thigh.

“We could skip the sailing...”

“Nope. I’m ready for it this time. I’ve got a bathing suit on.”

When they arrived at the dock, Amelia did a double take as she realized that the sailboat was not tied up at the dock, but was bobbing at anchor further out in the harbor. “How do we get out there?” she asked nervously.

“The rowboat. I didn’t want to scare you by using it the first time.”

“Very thoughtful of you,” she noted as he helped her into the eight-foot dinghy.

“The wind isn’t as strong today. We’ll be all right. Trust me.”

“After last night?”

“Did I do anything you didn’t expect me to do?” he asked innocently.

“No. Might have been kind of nice if you had,” Amelia added mischievously.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Knowing what to expect this time, and what was expected of her, she was able to relax away the remainder of the afternoon as they skimmed silently over the water. The breeze was light, the sun hot, the taste of salt spray tangy on her lips.

Back at the mooring, it was sweaty



work stowing the sails, coiling the ropes, and generally tidying up. Feeling hot and sticky, Amelia eyed the water longingly. "I'm going to swim back," she announced. "Bet I'll beat you in!" And she dove from the side of the sailboat. The water was a lot colder than she remembered, and the sun and spring air were like a hot blanket when she hauled herself out of the water. Randy arrived minutes later to find her sitting on the dock, face tipped back to the sun. He scrambled out of the dinghy, tied up, and turned to her as she stood.

"Now you need a shower," he noted, hauling her close, and his lips found hers. Everything else vanished from her universe, and she clung to his hard body like a limpet.

He broke the kiss, and in unspoken agreement he swept her into his arms and carried her to the house.

Once under the spray they frolicked like porpoises, taking turns with the soap until they were slippery with suds. He drew her to him, his body slick and sensuous against hers.

They dried each other thoroughly, and then he picked her up and carried her to the bed.

"Mmm," she sighed contentedly as he put her down.

"Like being carried?" he asked, sitting down beside her.

"Yes."

"I could do it for the rest of my life and never get tired of it," he said softly.

She pictured herself crippled, having to be carried everywhere, and shivered.

"You'd get tired of it, sooner or later."

"Never."

"Then you'd get tired of me. I'm not very interesting. I've never done anything but dance."

"Tell me all the places you've been to," he said, kissing her fingers.

"Well, New York City, of course. And

the West Coast. And Europe and the Soviet Union. And I've toured the Midwest. It was on a tour there that I got married."

"What happened?"

She looked up into his blue eyes, saw that he was very serious, and very interested.

He put a finger to her lips. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"There's not much to tell," she said. "As long as Jose and I were dancing, everything was fine. But when I got hurt and was stuck in the hospital in New York, he continued the tour without me. Before long, I got a letter from him, telling me about his new partner and asking for a divorce."

"Ouch!"

"Don't you see? All Jose and I had in common was dancing. You and I have even less than that."

"Why are you so anxious to put the hex on our relationship?" he demanded, exasperated.

"I just don't want you expecting more of it than is possible," she explained unhappily. "Besides, when I go back to dancing..."

"Don't you mean, 'if,' not 'when'?"

"No, I meant what I said. When."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Inside information. Now, are you going to just sit there all day?"

"Don't try to change the subject."

"I'm not." She snuggled intimately against his thigh.

"Oh yes you are."

"You're mean."

"I'm also very, very weak!" He sighed, stretching out beside her on the bed.

"Oh no you aren't. You are very, very strong, and this is what you wanted to do all the time anyway."

"Mindreader," he growled.

But even through the blossoming of love, the "if" was like a stone in her shoe,

impossible to ignore—until the pleasure became great enough to obliterate even that.

Later, still naked, they went downstairs and she sat at the counter and watched him putter around the kitchen, preparing dinner. They talked about sailing. Randy demonstrated how a boat moved by waving his hands in the air, and Amelia thought of Nureyev dancing *Le Corsair*.

Afterward, back in Randy's bedroom, stretched out in the moonlight, they talked late into the night. Then he made love to her again, slowly and gently. Amelia wished it could go on forever.

The next day standing at the barre, her legs encased in wool warm-up leggings, Amelia worked her way through a series of exercises. Lounging on the sofa, his legs stretched out on the coffee table, Randy watched each movement. Blinking back the sweat that was streaming into her eyes, Amelia turned the other way, critically inspecting her pose in the mirror.

The muscles in her legs throbbed with exertion. But her knee was better—she could manage all five positions now, with hardly a twinge.

Outside, a summer shower hissed past the windows. It had killed their plans for an afternoon sail, and Amelia had at last agreed to let him watch her work. She'd felt deliciously wicked as she'd led him up to her apartment.

It wasn't logical, of course. In the last few months she had spent more weekends at Randy's than she'd spent at home. But it was the first time he had been in her apartment since he'd carried her up there centuries ago.

Having finished the exercises, she turned to the barre, stretched, and with both hands on the barre for balance, tried to plie on point. Her knee felt stiff, unwilling, like a rusty hinge. It didn't actually hurt, but it worried her. It was as if there

was a weakness lurking there, ready to make itself known when she was least prepared.

Yet, except for her right knee, she felt fine, as good as she had before the injury.

Suddenly there was a banging on the downstairs door. "I'll see who it is," Randy offered.

She continued to work, keeping one ear cocked to the murmur of voices from below as she moved out away from the barre. When she heard two sets of footsteps on the stairs, she stopped and grabbed a towel, wiped the sweat off her face, then draped the towel around her neck.

"Hi, Doc." She greeted the surgeon as he followed Randy in.

"I thought I'd kill two love-birds with one stone and see how you both are doing," said Dr. Benson. "How's your knee, Randy?"

"Mine? Fine," Randy said, watching Amelia. She tried to slow her nervous pacing, knowing how easily he could read her moods. She knew why the doctor was there. He was still trying to convince her that her dancing days were over. She wondered if she would have to stand up to the two of them.

"Doc, do you have any idea what these dainty little things put themselves through—just to warm up?" Randy asked.

"I've always felt that ballet was an invention of the Inquisition. Have you been jogging?" He was prodding Randy's knee, flexing his leg.

"How do you think I keep my boyish figure?"

"Well, stick to soft surfaces," the doctor warned. "Okay, young lady, you're next."

"Oh, Doc, I'm fine," Amelia protested, still pacing. "Just watch," she exclaimed, going into a smooth enchaînement that concluded with a tour en l'air

into fourth position.

"Bravo!" Randy cheered, applauding wildly.

"Let's see some pirouettes," the doctor ordered. "But please, no fouettes!"

"Cheery soul, aren't you?" Amelia sighed. Deliberately, she went up on pointe, steadying herself with a hand on Randy's head as she extended her right leg.

"Relax it," the surgeon growled, rolling down the heavy legging. She came down off pointe, but didn't take her hand from Randy's head. Somehow she felt a need for his support as the doctor probed her knee with skilled fingers.

"No swelling," he announced, sounding both surprised and pleased.

"See, I told you," Amelia gloated, grinning triumphantly. "I'm up to three hundred lifts with the weight."

"That's not exercise; that's self-abuse. What's your hurry?"

"I've been invited to audition for a new production of *Coppelia*." She saw the surprise in Randy's face, and instantly regretted having been goaded into the revelation. "They haven't forgotten me yet, Doc."

"No one is going to forget you, Amelia," the doctor assured her. "But wouldn't you rather be remembered as strong and healthy and flawless?"

"I'm going to go take a shower before I stiffen up," she announced, and stalked out.

The rush of the water drowned out whatever Randy and the doctor were saying. The steamy spray pounded her body, and she turned and turned under it, deliberately relaxing her muscles. In a few minutes her only discomfort was mental—the memory of Randy's face when she'd mentioned the audition. Obviously, he hadn't believed that she meant to dance again. Why did everyone doubt her?

When she got out of the shower, she pulled on the new sweat pants and sweat shirt Randy had bought her on a recent shopping trip. It had been a crazy impulse-buying jaunt through a shopping mall—something she'd never done before. He'd gotten her the sweat suit, and she'd bought him a recording of *Swan Lake*.

"Is he gone?" she asked as she emerged from the bathroom.

"Yep."

"Thank goodness. Are you hungry?"

"No, but you must be after that workout."

"Not really," she lied. She was ravenous, but she'd put on too much weight already, thanks to Randy. She was trying desperately to take it off before starting classes.

"So, what's this about an audition?" he asked with false casualness.

"A new company's being put together, and I've been asked to try out for it," she said vaguely, afraid of his reaction if he really understood what it would mean.

"Are you going to?" he asked softly. She could see the worry forming behind his blue eyes. "If they take you, I suppose we won't be seeing so much of each other..."

"We wouldn't anyway. I'm going to start taking classes in the city. I was going to tell you today."

"How many? When?"

"Mondays and Thursdays, and once in a while on Saturday."

"Saturday?" he asked. Saturday had become their day. Sometimes it would be sailing or swimming, talking, and sharing. Sometimes just loving. Once in a while they'd go for a walk in the park or a ride in the car with the top down.

"Only some Saturdays."

"If you get the part, when would rehearsals start?"

"Not until September. We have the rest

of the summer."

"Except for the classes."

"Well, I can't go into the audition cold."

"You do know what you're risking, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I don't think you do. You're risking your health. You could wind up crippled for life. You know the doctor doesn't think your knee can take it." Randy drew her down onto his lap. His hand rested on her waist, and she put one arm behind his head, caressing his neck. The muscles there were rock hard with tension.

"You're also risking losing me," he added softly.

"No one said it was going to last forever," she said uncomfortably, a dull knife twisting slowly inside her. "And I told you from the start that I was going to dance again." She could see the pain in his eyes. Facing his pain was worse than facing her own.

"But I never believed you," he sighed.

"I'm sorry."

"How long do you think you can keep dancing?"

"Margot Fonteyn danced until she was in her fifties."

"Did she have a bad knee?"

"No. Isn't that some consolation? You shouldn't have to wait so long."

"Who said I was going to wait?"

She felt the blood drain from her face. "Wasn't that what you were asking? How long you'd have to wait?"

"And if I do wait, what am I going to get?" he demanded. "An invalid?"

Amelia leapt to her feet, stung by the bitterness in his voice. "Is that all I am to you? A body?"

"Isn't that all you are to your precious dance? Something to be used up and thrown away?"

"I love dancing!" she protested.

"I love you."

The words pierced her like a hot needle.

"And I love you," she whispered, voicing something she'd never dared admit before, even to herself.

"Then why can't you give up this idiotic idea of performing again?"

"Because I love dancing, too. Because it gives meaning to my entire life. Because I love the glitter, and the costumes, and the applause, and the beauty—even the pain of the classes. I don't know why I love it. I just do."

"And there isn't anything else in the world that can give your life meaning? I think you're into one hell of an ego trip," he said acidly.

"And just what kind of a trip were you into when you went crashing over the line for a first down?"

"When the time came, I was able to give it up."

"Well, I'm not! It isn't time, and I'm damn well not ready."

"Sometimes it's not up to us to decide whether it's time or not," he pointed out reasonably.

"You're right," she snapped. "It's not up to you or that damn doctor to decide. It's up to me."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. No doctor decided for me. My knee decided," Randy retorted angrily. "I had sense enough to know my career was over."

"Well dancing isn't football. It's art."

"So, we're back to the dumb jock again. If you'll excuse me, this is where I came in."

"Where are you going?" she asked, surprised.

"Home. It's been fun. Break a leg."

"That's not funny," she protested.

"It wasn't meant to be," he said without turning.

The next week in the printshop, after five solid days of not seeing Randy,

Amelia's bad temper boiled over and she found herself snapping at Carol for no reason.

"You and Randy had a fight, didn't you?" said Carol. "I've never seen you so irritable."

"I don't want to discuss it," Amelia snapped.

"What was it about?" Carol probed.

"I told you, I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, I think maybe you'd better," Carol retorted sourly. "And anyway, I think you're going to have to, because he just parked his car across the street."

Amelia glanced up and saw Randy waiting for a break in the traffic. He looked grim and determined, impatient, as if he wanted to kick the impeding cars out of the way. "He's not coming here. He works next door. Remember?" Amelia said as Randy started across the street.

"Of course I remember. But he's coming here."

"Tell him I'm out," Amelia ordered, swinging down off the stool. Almost running, she made for the sanctuary of her apartment, and she could hear the gate in the counter clatter as Randy sprinted up the steps. "Go away!" she yelled, slamming the door.

"Dammit, Amelia, open this door before I break it down!"

Oh, Lord, how desperately she wanted to see him again! Cloaking her misery in defiance, smothering it, she yanked the door open. "That's your answer to everything, isn't it? Brute force."

"Amelia," he groaned, and before she could take a step back he had swept her into his arms.

He kicked the door shut behind him and carried her across the polished wood floor of the old dance studio. Then he sank down on the sofa, snuggling her on his lap as easily as if she were a doll. She clutched at him, loving the feel of his arms

around her, loving the scent and the strength of him. Her hunger for this man, stifled for the past week, flared up hotter than ever as he showered her face with kisses.

"I couldn't stand it any longer," he said simply, stripping her shirt off her shoulders, his hand claiming the gentle swell of her breast.

"Oh, Lord." Amelia sighed as he made her entire body throb with desire. "Why?" she asked. "Why, why, why?" She was talking to herself as much as to him.

"Because I love you," he answered, removing the last of her clothes, exposing her whole body to his loving, hungry touch, to the sunlight spilling in through the big front windows.

"Oh, Randy, I missed you so."

"I'm here," he answered, moving with her, touching her as if he were trying to assure himself that she was real. "I'll never let you go."

"I was waiting to you."

"Shush," he urged.

They lay on the sofa for a long time, saying nothing. He was hot and secure against her, and Amelia didn't want to break the contact. It was so peaceful! She didn't have to think about anything. There was no room for worries. All the misery and weariness of the sleepless week had dropped away in a few glorious minutes.

When they awoke, noon had come and gone. Randy talked her into going home with him, using the excuse that her refrigerator would make anyone die of starvation.

She agreed, fighting the feeling that she was somehow selling out, but unable to resist. "For tonight."

His house seemed even more immaculate than usual. Amelia went out through the screened porch and joined Randy on the patio, where she stretched

out on the chaise, unwinding once again, both mentally and physically. He was so nice to be with, so easy to talk to.

So why did they fight? She gazed around the yard. It was very comfortable here. Very tempting. But she knew, deep in her heart, that if she accepted Randy's life, this life, dance would be gone forever.

Dancing and comfort were mutually exclusive. Dancing demanded single-minded concentration. It meant struggle and pain; loneliness and discomfort. But it also meant striving, achieving, creating. It filled a need that could never be filled by... all of this. The hunger still burned inside her, that nameless, indescribable hunger that only dance could satisfy.

And that was why they fought.

The sun had begun to sink slowly behind the trees. Randy got up to find a citronella candle in an amber glass, and they sat on the patio as the fireflies began to glitter in the dusk. Across the channel, lights flickered on to form dancing, twisting lines on the water. Overhead the stars began to emerge. There was a new moon—it would be a very dark night.

"You know what I'd like to do?" Randy asked.

"Do you really want me to guess?" Amelia retorted, smiling. Desire had been building steadily in her as they'd shared her nightfall.

"I'd like to go swimming."

"Swimming? Now?"

"It's a nice warm night," he pointed out.

"My suit's upstairs," she protested.

"Who said anything about suits?" he asked in a tone that made her shiver and burn all at the same time.

She felt her heart quicken as she contemplated the possibilities. "Sir, are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting? Is this an improper proposition I'm receiving?"

"I'm daring you to go swimming with me..."

She squirmed, rubbing her legs against each other. "You dare me?"

"I dare you."

She shot up from the chair. His face was shadowy and mysterious in the light of the candle, but there was an unmistakable gleam in his eyes. Grabbing her T-shirt, she stripped it up and off in one quick motion. She was attacking her shorts when he surged up out of his lounge and began shedding his clothes. Then, they walked hand and hand down to the beach. The water was frigid around her ankles as they waded out, and the night breeze insolently teased her bare body with gentle fingers. There were lights on in the houses on either side, but nobody else was about, and there was no one to see as they slowly walked out into the harbor.

When they were waist-deep, they leaned forward and pushed off, the sound of their sloshing entry echoing back at them. The water caressed her, and she felt free and uninhibited and just a bit wicked as she swam beside him. She rolled onto her back and floated along staring up at the starry vault of the sky.

"This is beautiful," she sighed, her head filled with the tangy scent of the salt water.

"You're beautiful," he said softly.

"I'll bet you say that to all the girls," she teased.

"I do, but there's only one of them." He drifted over to her and touched her, and her flesh tingled. His lips found hers, and she curled her arm behind his head. Their legs entwined sensuously and, she pressed herself against his hot, hard body, and felt his readiness and hunger.

He guided them back to the beach. Then, still in the water, they slid into an embrace, and the cool sand was a gritty contrast to the fiery slickness of his skin.

What seemed like hours later he lifted her in his arms and carried her upstairs. They lay together in the bed and made love yet again, and she lost herself in him, not surfacing again until the morning sun flooded the room and woke her up. She heard the shower running, and unable to resist the urge, she slipped out of bed, tiptoed to the bathroom, and climbed into the shower with him.

"Good morning," she murmured, sleepy-eyed, snuggling against him contentedly as the hot, fresh water sluiced away the salt from their nighttime swim.

"Did I wake you?" he asked. "You looked so peaceful when I got up."

"I was. I am. Don't let's do anything to change that today, okay?"

"Okay," he agreed.

They managed to hold to their agreement as the morning stretched into the afternoon, but even as they sailed and talked and laughed, she knew the problem was still there, like a burr under a saddle. Somehow, it made the pleasure of the day all the more poignant.

"Want to go for a swim?" Randy asked later when they were relaxing on the patio.

"No I can't," she answered reluctantly. "I've got to be getting home. I've got my first class tomorrow."

"At least stay for some supper," he offered.

"Randy, please! Don't!"

His exasperation got the better of the careful control he'd been maintaining all day. "Why are you so damned determined to persist in this idiocy?"

"Idiocy? Is that what it is to you? Idiocy?"

"It's preposterous!" he exploded angrily. "You've been told it's impossible. Why won't you listen to anyone?"

"If you think something that means so much to me is idiocy, I don't see that we have anything more to say to each other!"

she shot back furiously, stung to the core.

He guided her through the door and into the house. "I'm sorry," he apologized, insincerely it seemed to her. "But it's only dancing."

"Only dancing?" Amelia snapped.

"I—"

"I was right about you. You are nothing but a mindless collection of muscles."

"Amelia," he protested, reaching for her.

"Don't you touch me," she flung at him viciously. "And don't bother to show me the way out." She strode outside down the gravel driveway. The cutting edges of the stones felt good under her bare feet. Then she reached the pavement, and a pebble under her heel made her lurch awkwardly. Her knee responded with a twinge that made her hiss with pain, but she kept going. The streetlights were blurred by the tears spilling down her cheeks.

She was turning the corner when she heard a car behind her, and stepped aside to avoid getting run over. But it pulled up beside her, and she knew who it was. Resolutely, she trudged on, lurching and limping.

"Amelia, stop being a damn fool," Randy barked at her. "Will you get in before you cut yourself on some broken glass or something?"

The thought of what a wound like that would do to her dancing was enough to jolt Amelia to a halt. "Will you drive me straight home and keep your mouth shut?"

"Don't worry. I won't waste my breath," he said.

After a sleepless night, Amanda went to her dance lesson the next day, smiling at her instructor as she entered the studio.

"Miss Jorgenson," Monsieur greeted her quietly, in his usual calm, raspy tone.



"Monsieur," she responded politely — and that was it. That was all that passed between them when she walked into the studio. The piano was in its usual corner. She went over to the barre and began warming up.

"You're in my place," someone announced suddenly, startling Amelia.

"I beg your pardon?"

"This is my place at the barre," the girl insisted.

"But, I always..." Amelia's voice trailed off. She had been about to say it had always been her place. But that had been in another time, another class.

"Sorry," she said, moving down.

The class began with the usual plies, and Amelia settled into the maitre de ballet's rhythm. Some faulted him for the deliberation of his work, the plodding pace. But no one could fault the results he got. Dancers could learn from him, hone their skills, then carry what they'd learned over to their work with more dramatic directors and choreographers.

"Miss Jorgenson!" Monsieur said. "It is pap, pap, pap, pap. Not blah, blah, blah. Crisp! Crisp! Again!"

Amelia fought to tighten her movements, concentrating on making the motions crisper, sharper, clearer—always clearer. Sweat ran down into her eyes, forcing her to blink.

The maitre de ballet moved down the line of dancers at the barre. He touched Amelia, lifting her weary arm half an inch, changing the angle of her hand—just so.

Once more she was singled out for correction. She began to hate him. She remembered the feeling well. She had hated him passionately, convinced he delighted in tormenting her.

But, then, there was also the love.

On and on and on the class went, until Amelia was ready to drop. Somehow, from somewhere, she dredged up the

energy to continue. She shed her shirt, then quickly put it back on when the cool air touched her sweat-soaked leotard. During an all too brief break, she managed to get a drink.

From the barre they moved to center practice. She felt her knee protesting as she took fifth position. Gritting her teeth, she concentrated on keeping her little toe on the floor, knowing how important the contact was—knowing it from brutal experience. One moment of inattention to that one tiny point was what had landed her in the hospital.

Mercifully, her sense of balance hadn't faded with time, so at least she didn't find herself tottering amateurishly. But just as she felt she was attaining some standing in the class, Monsieur Benitti again singled her out. She felt like a gawky novice as he humbled her thoroughly.

For some reason, however, things seemed to go better after that. Not the physical aspects, but the mental ones. She still ached with exhaustion. But now, somehow, the moves began to come a little easier, and Monsieur Benitti's corrections didn't sting so much. She wasn't a has-been making an ass of herself, only a dancer trying to improve.

When the class was over and the maitre de ballet passed her on his way out, their eyes met. And for just a flicker of an instant, she thought she saw him wink at her.

Amelia felt as if every part of her had been pounded to a pulp. How could she possibly have thought she was in shape? Two months to get ready for the audition? It would take two years!

After seven weeks of classes with Monsieur Benitti, the day of the audition finally arrived. They had agreed that Amelia was ready for it, and it took place at Carnegie Hall.

When she arrived home late that after-

noon, the door of the print shop promised welcome sanctuary from the noise and stink of the evening traffic, but Amelia hesitated when she saw Carol moving around behind the counter. She really felt like being alone for a while. Finally, she forced herself to take a deep breath, and opened the door. The bell heralded her arrival cheerily.

"Did you get the part?" Carol demanded with her usual lack of ceremony.

"Hi," Amelia returned, yielding to the impulse to bedevil her just a little bit. "Anything exciting happen while I was out?"

"Did you get the part?" Carol repeated anxiously.

"I got it," Amelia admitted at last.

"I knew you could do it! I knew you could!" Carol bubbled. "What was it like? How was your knee? Who else was there? What did they say?"

"Whoa, slow down," Amelia begged. "It was fine. And my knee is fine. There were ten dancers there, three of them men, because they haven't decided on Franz yet, and they wanted to see us work together. There was that Russian who skipped in San Francisco last year—"

"What about the ballerinas?"

"Youngsters," Amelia answered. "Or is it just that I'm getting old? I'd never dreamed things could change so much in a year. Anyway, it's me and Igorevich," Amelia concluded. "If I want it."

"If you want it?" Carol asked, shocked.

Amelia tried to analyze her feelings. On the long ride home, she'd avoided thinking. Now she had to face herself. Where was the elation she'd expected? "I worked months for this moment, and now I'm wondering if it was worth it. It doesn't seem to mean as much as it used to." Amelia shook her head. "Somehow, the spark simply wasn't there."

"It'll be there when you perform," Carol insisted.

"I wasn't the best one at the audition," Amelia said suddenly, admitting something she'd been hiding from herself all afternoon. "There was a girl, Rhoda Andrews, about eighteen, who was really inspired. Which is precisely what I was not. The magic wasn't there. I felt, oh, I don't know...I felt mechanical."

"If you weren't the best," said Carol, "why did you get the part?"

Amelia tipped her head. "I'm a curiosity. I have a reputation, a degree of notoriety. To the producers, I'm the best choice because I can bring in the box office—not because of how good I am now, but because of how good I once was. And, I have the additional appeal of having come back from a 'career threatening injury,' to quote the newspapers."

"You were great," Carol said loyally.

"Was. Maybe," Amelia countered wryly.

"You'll be great again. All you need is an audience. You'll see."

"I got the part," Amelia said softly, "but I got it for the wrong reason. The same thing happened to me once. I got beaten out by a has-been with a big name. I know how it feels. And I swore I'd never do it to anyone, that I'd know when it was time to quit."

"I noticed Randy was here this morning," Carol said carefully after a short silence.

"He ordered some stationery. I figured it'd keep me busy over the weekend. He wasn't alone."

"She's very pretty," Carol noted.

"If you like acrylic."

"You could try to get him back, you know," Carol suggested.

"If he's such a sucker for Miss Billboard, I'm not sure I want him. Besides, I've got a commitment to dance, now."

"You could tell them you don't want

the part.”

“It’s not that simple, because I *do* want to perform again. I don’t know why. Maybe it’s because I have the feeling I never did the best I could. Anyway, I shook hands on the deal. They’re counting on me.”

Amelia stood under the hot shower, letting it steam the ache out of her muscles. Every time she thought of the audition, she got a sour feeling in her stomach. The magic just hadn’t been there. She hadn’t been a mischievous, flirtatious Swan-hilda/Coppelia, she’d been an automaton going through the motions. She felt as if she were betraying the art she loved so much.

Bundled in her robe after the shower, Amelia poured herself a glass of wine—from a bottle Randy had bought her—and stood at the windows looking down at the street. She wondered what he was doing now.

She thought of him with that other woman, and winced.

Damn him, she thought, why had he ever come into her life? But immediately she realized how much she would have missed if he hadn’t.

Suddenly, everything clicked into place, and Amelia knew why she had been so uninspired at the audition. Because she had known she couldn’t share her triumph with him.

She took a gulp of wine and frowned. It was like confronting a tangle of string, trying to find the end and unravel the mess. Finally, she picked up the end labeled Randy, and studied it. She knew she had the key, right there. But what to do with it?

She imagined herself in Randy’s arms and felt all the tension drain out of her. What would she give to have Randy back? What would she have to give to get him back?

Sometime during the night the idea jelled. Maybe the answer had always been there, in her subconscious, just waiting to be realized. In any event, she’d woken up with the solution so obvious she wondered why she hadn’t seen it before. Now all she had to do was put it all together. First thing was to call her agent.

She knew the deal she wanted was a test of her power. But, Amelia had begun to realize the leverage she had over the producers. And while her agent might squeal like a wounded animal, she knew he’d negotiate it for her.

She suddenly felt scared. It was a long shot, a big gamble, but it was the only way out of her dilemma. If it didn’t work, she might be left with nothing. But if she didn’t try it, she’d definitely be left with nothing.

She got out a pad of paper and started a list. Randy’s name was at the top. When she was done, she pursed her lips and frowned. Getting that many tickets was going to cost a fortune. Then she remembered a name out of the past—David Bailey—and reached for the telephone.

David Bailey was a wealthy patron she had met at a long-ago fund-raiser. She had to brazen her way through three secretaries before she reached him. His voice was soft and calm and precise without being at all affected. “Miss Jorgenson? What an unexpected honor...”

Encouraged by his warm greeting, Amelia quickly outlined her problem, and minutes later she hung up the phone with a happy smile and a sincere “Thank you!”

Gingerly she flexed her knee, remembering the thirty-two fouettes in Act III of *Swan Lake*. One thing for sure, it was going to be a performance she would never forget. If things went wrong, she knew she could wind up with a brace on her leg for the rest of her life. Maybe she should skip

the fouettes. A lot of ballerinas did.

All too quickly it was the night of the performance.

"Why are you doing all this for me?"

Rhoda Andrews asked as they sat in the dressing room applying their makeup. "Making me your understudy and all?"

"Guilt," Amelia said candidly. "And because you've earned it. You're good. Now relax. You know what to do if my knee goes?"

"Yes, but don't even mention it," Rhoda wailed.

"Nothing's going to happen," Amelia assured her, adding a silent *I hope* to herself.

There was a knock on the door, and the wardrobe mistress bustled in to check the costumes again.

Amelia wondered for the umpteenth time if Randy was going to be there. What if something went wrong? What if he changed his mind at the last minute? Dr. Benson had assured her over and over that Randy would be there, but she had instructed the doctor not to tell Randy it was her last performance—unless there was no other way to get him there. She wanted to tell him herself.

But as soon as he arrived, if he came, Randy would know. No one backstage was talking about anything else, and Amelia assumed the conversations out front wouldn't be any different. At the last moment the producers had decided to capitalize on the fact that this was her final appearance. Hoping to fill their coffers, they'd jacked up ticket prices, turning the opening into a benefit performance. But in these days of publicity hype, she wondered if he'd believed it. What if he thought it was all just a cheap trick, and refused to come?

Someone else hurried in, adding a bouquet of flowers already crowding the dressing room.

"Okay, let's get flexing," Amelia ordered. She could hear the hall coming to life, the rustle of early arrivals taking their seats.

By the time she and Rhoda were warmed up, the orchestra began tuning up, and Amelia's mouth went dry. She poured them each a quarter of a glass of water. "Sip it," she urged when Rhoda shook her head and backed away. "Trust me."

"Five minutes," a page announced.

In the wings, next to the edge of the curtain, they stood close together. "What do you think of at a time like this?" Rhoda asked.

"What I'm supposed to do, how I'm supposed to do it," Amelia answered absently, wondering if she dared sneak a look at the audience to see whether Randy was there. The director would kill her, but she had to know. She decided to risk it—not the director's wrath, but the potential disappointment of knowing Randy hadn't come, that it was all going to be for nothing—and tugged at the heavy curtain. Just as the house lights dimmed, she spotted him. Her knees went wobbly with relief.

There was a flurry of applause for the conductor.

"Places, please," the director called, looking straight at Amelia, and the overture began. Amelia felt her pulse quicken, felt her heart sing.

Then the curtains opened, and she entered a dreamworld. It all came together with mystical beauty and grace, and Amelia felt as if God had reached down and touched her.

Never had the orchestra sounded crisper, never had the electricians hit their cues so precisely, never had the corps de ballet been so flawless. Amelia became Odette, the princess changed into a swan by the evil magician. And Igorevich became Siegfried, young and ardent and impulsive.

Together, he and Amelia wove a love story in mime and dance. Would Randy understand all she was saying to him, the layers beneath layers? On one level she was saying, "This is why I love dancing." On another, "This is for you, and you alone. No one else matters. Giving it up is my gift to you, the most precious thing I can offer."

Between scenes she wandered into the wings, only vaguely aware of the people fussing around her, primping her. At the end of the second act, when she changed from the angelic white Odette into the wicked black Odile, she didn't even recognize herself in the mirror. Energy flowed through her, making her impatient to return to the stage—to dance.

Amelia was peripherally aware of Rhoda changing, getting ready to take over as Odile should disaster strike. But Amelia was somewhere above it all, on a level where nothing could reach her. Except the horrible, traitorous thought that maybe, deep down in her heart, she didn't want to give this all up. That Randy wasn't worth the sacrifice.

Then the music resumed, and she was back on stage. Suddenly her partner's face dissolved into Randy's and she became even more irresistible, more tantalizing, more seductive. She wanted to be so desirable he would see no one else in the world but her, want no one but her forever.

Finally, there came the moment all Odiles reach for, have reached for for over a century. Amelia swept into it confidently, totally sure of herself, knowing that this was what she had been born to do. But during the first fouette came the pain, an evil snake of fire worming its way into her knee. Still, it was as if the agony didn't belong to her. It was there, but it couldn't touch her. The fouettes went on, the dizzying whirl carrying her around the stage. Thirty-two sparkling turns where

the slightest misstep could spell disaster. The audience went wild.

At last the act was over and she was being carried to her dressing room. Someone was yelling for ice, and people whirled around as she was eased down on the chaise. Tears of pain leaked down her cheeks. Someone blotted them gently.

"Here's the ice," a loud voice announced, and a delightful, numbing cold engulfed her knee.

"How are you?" the director demanded, leaning over her anxiously. "Better get ready to take over, Rhoda."

"No," Amelia snapped, sitting up. "Get out of here, I've got to change."

"You can't go on!" he screamed.

"She knows if she can do it or not," Rhoda said quietly.

"But—"

"Get out of here," Rhoda said angrily. "Everyone. Out! Now!" She physically shoved the director through the door, and then herded out the mob that had gathered.

"Thanks. Help me change and then I'll help you," Amelia said, still clutching the ice pack to her knee.

"You sit still and keep that ice on," Rhoda retorted.

"Could the audience tell I was hurt?" Amelia asked, suddenly afraid Randy knew what had happened. What would he do when he saw her on stage again? Sit there and suffer? Find his way backstage and grab her when she exited? Leap over the orchestra and onto the stage?

"Are you kidding? The way you've been dancing, you haven't even been touching the stage. All set, now?"

"Yes." Amelia was still holding the ice around her knee. Hesitantly, she flexed her leg. The pain wasn't too bad, but the joint had that familiar rusty-hinge feeling.

As the final-act overture began, Amelia gathered up the pain, confined it to a small ball, and tucked it away in a corner

of her mind.

The dreamlike quality of her performance had gone when her knee went. She was acutely aware of what she had to do now, of how hard she'd have to work just to make it through. Before, there had been inspiration. But now only sheer guts, sweat, and desperation could help her.

When the curtains opened, however, the magic was somehow still there. Amelia was dancing better than she ever had before. Despite the fear that her knee would give out completely, she continued to reach for the impossible—and to attain it.

As the entire cast gathered for curtain calls, Amelia realized how bad her knee really was. Fortunately, Igorevich was on one side of her, and Evan Thatcher—von Rothbart—was on the other. The two men put their arms around her waist as the curtains opened, giving her a few precious moments to rest before she would have to take her turn alone.

By then the house lights had come up and she could see Randy standing in the box. He was applauding deliriously. Keeping her right leg straight, she bowed, to him, sinking down, touching her head to her knee.

Flowers were raining down wildly. The stage was carpeted with blossoms. Igorevich came back out, and Evan, and then the entire company. Suddenly Amelia knew she could never give it up. But then, just as suddenly, viciously, the pain broke free of the fetters she had imposed on it. Her knee gave way, sharply, finally, triumphantly betraying her. As she crumpled to the floor, the clapping and bravos were replaced by an eerie hush. In the silence, blackness threatened to overwhelm Amelia as she felt Igorevich holding her up.

Then the curtains closed with a rush, and he picked her up and carried her off stage. It seemed as if the whole company

had forced its way into the tiny cubicle as she was put down. Igorevich and Rhoda backed up against the chaise and tried to keep the curious group from besieging Amelia.

Someone was plucking at the tights on her right leg. She lifted her head and blinked back the tears of triumph and pain. "Get away from me, you quack," she said angrily as the company doctor began fiddling with her knee. "My surgeon will be here in a minute."

"Amelia, are you all right?" Rhoda asked, turning to kneel beside her. The girl's cheeks were streaked with tears, ragged black stripes of mascara ran down her face.

"Don't start blubbering," Amelia said unsteadily, "or I'll start, too. And please—don't let anyone cut these tights."

Rhoda began laughing and crying at the same time. "You were magnificent. You *are* magnificent."

Amelia tried to get up, but the crush of people around the chaise was too great. "Will you please get these people out of here?"

Suddenly the uproar outside doubled and Amelia raised her head. The door exploded inward, and Randy charged in. The director was hanging on one of the ballplayer's massive arms, like a banner. Randy shook him off with absentminded ease, then shrugged off the two security men clinging to his shoulders. Carol and Dr. Benson followed. "Amelia?"

"Randy!" His arms went around her.

"Excuse me, Doctor, if you don't mind, I'm her orthopedist," Dr. Benson broke in.

"Don't cut the tights," Amelia wailed, her cheek pressed against Randy's chest.

"Oh, shut up," Randy growled, cradling her against him. "I'll buy you a million pairs of tights."

"I don't want a million pairs. I want this pair. They'll be the last pair I ever

performed in."

"If you messed up my work, I'm going to turn you over my knee," Doc vowed as he examined her. "How many of those damn things..."

"Fouettes," Carol supplied promptly.

"Amelia, you were superb. I bow to you. My congratulations," a soft, raspy voice announced.

"Monsieur Benitti!" Amelia squealed, reaching up to take her teacher's outstretched hand.

"It is a performance that will live for a long, long time."

"Thank you, Monsieur. For everything," Amelia said humbly.

"Thank you, Amelia," he replied.

The teacher's exit created an awkward silence. "Well, you'll walk again," Dr. Benson announced finally. "I'll want to get X rays tomorrow, and I may have to do another arthroscopy. No more dancing, dammit!"

"No more," Amelia agreed, looking up into Randy's eyes. "I promise."

After the cast party she and Randy drove in silence for a while. Then, as they

headed up the East River Drive, Randy finally spoke. "I had no idea what it was you were trying to do."

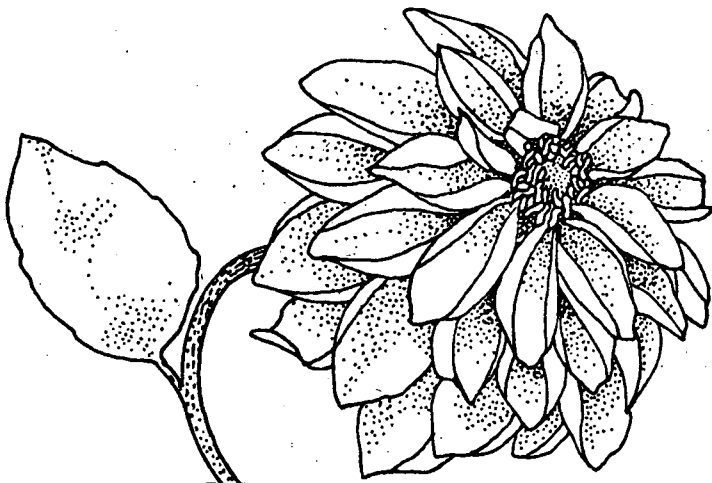
"I know."

"How can you give it up?"

She rested her hand on his leg and calmly reviewed all the thoughts she'd had on the subject since meeting him some eight months ago. She knew she had to get it straight in her mind, now, for once and for all. It couldn't be put off any longer. Was she stopping just because her knee had gone? She remembered something Monsieur Benitti had said—that her knee would last if she truly wanted to dance. Well, it hadn't lasted. Slowly, like the dawn breaking, she realized her knee knew more than she did. She loved Randy more than dancing. Now, finally, she understood what her body, her heart, had been trying to tell her all along. "I'm gaining much more than I'm losing."

"Are you sure?" he demanded.

"Yes," she said simply, feeling his large, warm hand covering hers. "I'm very sure." ♥





# THE STEELE TRAP

*After one womanizer breaks her heart, kindergarten teacher, Kerry O'Kaye, swears off the breed forever. But when she wins a night on the town with best-selling adventure writer and infamous romeo, Steele Gray, she finds neither her body nor her heart can resist him.*

—BETSY OSBORNE—

Kerry O'Kaye didn't want to attend the Romantic Novelists' Convention in New York the last weekend in May. She didn't even read romances; her tastes ran exclusively to nonfiction. She offered her friend Nina Tarasi a plethora of excuses, hoping one would suffice.

"I'm really tired," she began, watching Nina's dark eyes narrow with a determination Kerry knew well. They were doing their laundry in a small laundromat near

the apartment building where they both lived, Nina on the third floor, Kerry on the second. "It's been a grueling week, Nina, and my sinuses are really bothering me."

Nina set her chin with a determination that made Kerry's heart sink. "How can you have a grueling week teaching kindergarten? Kerry, you have to come with me! This convention could be the beginning of my career as a romance writer! You know how I detest teaching music to those tone-

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deaf little terrors at Oak View Elementary School."

"I understand why *you* want to go, Nina, but—"

"It will be fun, Kerry," Nina interrupted, trying another tack. "We'll have a weekend in the city, stay at a nice hotel, meet a lot of interesting people."

"Romance writers, editors, agents, booksellers, and fans," Kerry read from the brochure. "'Win a glamorous night on the town with Steele Gray.' Who or what is a Steele Gray?"

"Oh, come on, Kerry! I know your reading tastes run to moldy old history books, but you must have heard of Steele Gray." Kerry shook her head no. "He's a writer—in hardcover! He writes spy-adventure-type novels." Nina rolled her eyes. "With lots of sex. A couple of his books have been made into TV movies. His heroes are out of the macho Clint Eastwood mold: forceful, aggressive, masterful with women."

"Ah, the stereotype lives. No doubt Steele Gray personifies his literary creations."

"He's a real hunk, Kerry. I've seen his picture in *People* magazine, and wow! Tom Selleck, step aside."

"Oh," Kerry said unenthusiastically. "That type."

"Six-four, deep blue eyes, thick dark hair, a physique to die for—and you disapprove?" Nina gasped.

Kerry handed the brochure back to Nina. "I hope the lucky winner realizes that a machismo throwback like him doesn't have much use for romance. Or for any of the softer, gentler feelings between male and female." Kerry spoke from her own experience. Her one love affair had been with a small-scale Steele Gray, a professor in the education department where Kerry had been a graduate student. Kerry considered James a mistake of her youth, and she was well

over him now—but she felt a certain antagonism toward all womanizers as a result of her one experience with the breed.

"What time is Howard picking you up tonight, Kerry?" Nina asked, cunningly changing the topic.

"Six-thirty. He wants to go into South Philly for some linguini." No one enjoyed food more than Howard Stover; he was rather dull, but an undemanding and guaranteed date for Saturday nights. And she had Nina to thank for the blind date on which they'd met. She owed her friend a favor for that. If this conference was really so important to Nina... Kerry bowed to the inevitable. "O.K., Nina, I'll go to the Romantic Novelists' Convention with you," she conceded with a sigh.

"But, Nina, this seminar is perfect for you. Plot and Character Development for Beginning Writers. And you're already registered for it. You've paid for it!" Kerry waved the registration card helplessly in front of her friend. They were in the hotel ballroom where the Romantic Novelists' Convention had convened an hour earlier. The group was now beginning to disperse into separate rooms for the scheduled seminars and discussion groups although a number of editors were still milling around.

Nina shoved the card into her purse. "I don't need any writing tips, Kerry. I'm already a writer. You've read my manuscript, you know the way I write."

Yes, Kerry did know, and that was one of the reasons she had agreed to accompany Nina to this conference. For if Nina really intended to pursue a career as a romance writer, she needed each and every seminar dedicated to mastering the art. Upon reading Nina's manuscript, Kerry had been horrified. It was beyond a doubt the most appalling piece of writing she'd ever encountered. And the sex

scenes! Graphic, perverted, shocking! Kerry had actually blushed as she'd read them.

Kerry watched as Nina backed a pretty editor in a rose knit suit against the wall and shoved the manuscript into her hands.

"Just read the first chapter or so," Nina demanded, blocking the editor's attempt to sidestep away from her. "Raging Passion Romances are my very favorites, and I want to give you first chance to buy my novel."

Kerry watched with a feeling of doom. She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that today was going to be one of the longest days she would ever spend.

At the banquet that evening, Kerry was seated between Marge, a historical-fiction writer and Shirley, a historical-fiction fan. Both were incredibly knowledgeable about the Regency period in England and Kerry enjoyed discussing it with them.

Several times she tried to draw Nina into the conversation, but her friend was unusually subdued tonight. Poor Nina. She had taken her novel's rejection quite hard. After spending the day chasing editors and agents and forcing them to read the opening pages of the manuscript, she had met with defeat on all fronts.

"And now, we've come to the part of the evening that we've all been breathlessly awaiting!" a pretty young woman in scarlet crepe de chine standing behind a small dais said into a microphone.

"That's Joanne Green, the organizer of the convention," Marge, the writer on Kerry's right, murmured. Kerry was surprised to see television cameras on the scene. "And that hunk is Steele Gray."

Kerry strained her neck to see the very tall, handsome man standing near the dais beside Joanne Green.

"The winner of the night on the town with Steele Gray is..." Joanne Green

cried breathlessly, holding up the index card she'd drawn from the huge pink box, "... Kerry O'Kaye!"

The whole room burst into applause. Shirley and Marge shrieked with delight. "You won, Kerry! You won!" Nina's voice, shrill and excited, echoed in Kerry's ears: "And you can give him my manuscript to read!"

Kerry remained frozen in her chair, immobilized by shock. "There must be some mistake," she managed weakly as Shirley and Marge pulled her to her feet. "I—I never put my name in—"

"I did!" Nina dumped her manuscript into Kerry's arms.

"Kerry O'Kaye, come on up and meet your date for tonight, Steele Gray!" the girlish voice enthused over the microphone.

Shirley pointed Kerry in the right direction and Nina gave her a shove. "Go on, Ker!"

As Kerry neared the dais, her eyes momentarily connected with Steele Gray's electric-blue gaze and an odd shiver raced through her. He exuded a compelling virility that drew her—and probably every other woman—like a magnet.

Kerry had no illusions as to her own lack of magnetism. Having grown up with three *truly* beautiful sisters, Kerry was all too aware of her own limitations. At just over five foot five, she was neither petite nor willowy. Her features, she knew, were regular but nothing spectacular... except, perhaps, for her large, wide-set eyes.

The pink crepe-paper hearts on the cover of Nina's manuscript fluttered in the air as she came to a halt beside Steele Gray. He took her hand in his and smiled down at her with practiced ease. "Hello, Kerry, I'm Steele."

She made no reply. Her fingers were icy cold, her palms perspiring.

Joanne Green was outlining the

marvelous evening ahead of them, listing the various night spots with the hearty enthusiasm of a game-show host. Someone shoved a glass of pink champagne into Steele's hand and then an identical glass into Kerry's. Joanne proposed a toast "to a night on the town in the romance publishing capital of the world."

Kerry didn't recall drinking the champagne, but when she glanced down at the goblet a few minutes later, it was empty. And then promptly refilled.

"Relax," Steele Gray said softly, his voice warm against her ear. "There's no need to be nervous. Just answer the questions and smile into the camera."

The next few minutes passed in a blur of confusion. Then Steele was guiding Kerry through the cheerful crowd, out of the ballroom, and into a spacious hotel lobby.

"They have a limousine waiting out front for us." Steele steered her out the door into the warm May evening. A shining pink limousine was parked alongside the curb in front of the hotel with a uniformed chauffeur in the driver's seat. "Pink!" Steele muttered with unbridled ferocity. "It needed only this. . ."

The pink limousine pulled away from the hotel with Steele and Kerry ensconced in the wide back seat. A bottle of pink champagne was tucked in a bucket of ice on the floor of the car along with two goblets, pink ribbons tied around their slender stems. Steele uncorked the bottle and filled both glasses, handing one to Kerry. She gulped the wine nervously as she fidgeted in the seat beside him, trying desperately to come up with some interesting conversational gambit.

"This—this is rather like a blind date, isn't it?" she ventured. She could almost see her sisters wince at her lack of originality and wit. But she was stuck with it now. "And once again, it's arranged by Nina, if only indirectly. She's a friend of

mine who's always trying to fix me up on blind dates," Kerry added, feeling increasingly inane.

"In my life, it's my sister Deborah who lands me in situations like this. Actually, I have Deb to thank for tonight. The Romantic Novelists' Convention organizers wanted a prince or a film star for their night-on-the-town lottery, and when none was available, Deborah volunteered me. She's an ambitious assistant editor of *Raging Passion Romances* and she wanted to do her part. I was out of the country at the time and arrived home yesterday to learn that I was to be raffled off tonight like a damn television set!"

Kerry laughed. She couldn't help herself; Steele looked so disgruntled as he told the tale. And she was absurdly pleased that tonight hadn't been his own idea. He had been an unwilling raffle prize, and she an unwilling winner. She began to feel a bond between them, a sudden and not unpleasant intimacy.

"More champagne, Kerry?"

"Please." She held out her glass. She was feeling increasingly chatty. "I wish it weren't pink, though. I feel as if I've overdosed on that color today."

"A romance writer who hates pink?" Steele chuckled. "That smacks of insurrection. What is your favorite color?"

"Kelly green," she retorted. "And I'm a kindergarten teacher."

"But you *hope* to be a romance writer, hmmm? Here, let me see that manuscript of yours. You were going to ask me to look it over, weren't you?"

"It's not mine," Kerry said quickly. "A—a friend wrote it." That sounded weak to her own ears, as if she were too shy to claim the work as her own.

Steele switched on the small overhead light and Kerry watched him leaf through the pages, awed when he finished the first several chapters with astonishing speed.

"Does it continue in the same vein throughout?" Steele asked, eyeing her strangely.

Kerry nodded.

Steele regarded her oddly. "Who would ever have dreamed it?" He gave a low whistle. "A sweet little kindergarten teacher possessing such a kinky imagination. Or are those triple X-rated episodes based on real-life experience?"

"No!" Kerry was horrified. "I didn't—"

"Then you put your innermost sexual fantasies down on paper?" A gleam shone in his dark blue eyes. "Under that conservative, demure exterior dwells a hot little adventuress hungering for..." He broke off, grinning wickedly.

"You're wrong, Mr. Gray!" Steele's feral grin made Kerry shiver. "You see, I didn't even—"

"Steele," he corrected smoothly. "And I do have a few more comments to make about the—er—romantic novel, Kerry."

"The novel is terrible, I know." Kerry was relieved to drop the subject of her innermost sexual fantasies. "Everyone at the convention who read it found it contemptible."

"Contemptible? I think it's hilarious. You should consider selling it to the *National Lampoon* as a parody of the romance novel craze."

That struck Kerry as extremely funny. She began to laugh. "My favorite part was where the heroine develops amnesia and can't remember she's on her way to get a fix. Suddenly, she's cured of her heroin addiction because she can't remember it. A rather neat little plot device, hmmm?" Kerry grinned up at him.

"I admire your sense of humor about it, Kerry," Steele smiled warmly at her.

He was pouring her more champagne when the limousine lurched to a sudden halt. Kerry squealed as the icy liquid

splashed into her lap. "Damn!" Steele muttered. A quick glance confirmed that he was as soaked as she.

"At least the manuscript was spared," Kerry said with relief, thinking of Nina's displeasure had it been ruined.

Steele seemed to find her remark extremely funny. He roared with laughter and Kerry joined in. Everything was funny. She'd never had such a good time in her life.

"We're both soaking wet! What do we do now?"

"I guess we can't go out on the town wearing pink champagne," Kerry observed. "Maybe we'd better call it a night."

"Let's not end it yet, Kerry. I have a better idea. We're not far from my place. Why don't we go there? You can wash and dry your clothes at my apartment and they'll be ready within the hour. I'll change into some dry things and then we'll continue our night on the town."

After the limo dropped them off in front of a huge high-riser, Steele led her down a carpeted hall and into his apartment.

"I'll give you a tour of the place," he said, draping his arm around her waist.

Kerry carefully removed it. "I just thought you needed a little assistance," Steele protested with an injured air.

"I've been walking on my own power for years, thanks all the same."

"Not after countless glasses of pink champagne, though." But he made no further attempts to touch her. He guided her through the living room, dining room, and kitchen of the condominium. The rooms were spacious and elegantly decorated.

"It's wonderful," she breathed.

"And now, let's get you out of those wet clothes." Steele took her arm and led her down the hall into a bedroom decorated in yellow and pale blue. "Put

this on, honey." He handed her a bundle of soft rose silk. "Do you need any help getting undressed?"

"No!" she assured him. He flashed a wicked grin and left the room.

Kerry quietly undressed and put on the robe. It was very short, reaching only the tops of her thighs. It had a deeply plunging neckline that barely covered the swell of her breasts.

A long, low whistle made her jump. Steele Gray stood in the doorway, wearing a robe of navy velour.

She felt Steele's eyes upon her, moving over the length of her body with astonished admiration. "You should be severely penalized for hiding a figure like yours under that shapeless knit sack, Kerry O'Kaye."

Steele moved closer, his blue eyes glittering and cupped her shoulders with his powerful hands, verbalizing his approval. "Long legs, small waist, and full, womanly breasts. You have the figure of my fantasy dream girl, Kerry."

His smile faded as he contemplated her with a frank sexual hunger. "I want you, baby."

The words were a blatant cliché, Kerry thought indignantly. She felt deeply insulted. There was nothing personal in the man's approach; he hadn't even called her by her name. "Do you have much success with that line?" she asked, her curiosity momentarily overcoming her flash of annoyance. "Do some women actually find that romantic and irresistible?" She twisted out of his grasp, moving down the hall. "I'd like to do my clothes now, if you'll direct me to the washer and dryer."

"Oh, don't look so scared. I'm not going to hurt you," Steele muttered irritably. "I've never had to force a woman in my life and I'm not about to start with you. Relax, Kerry." A slow, unwilling smile curved his lips. "Even though you trampled my poor,

frail male ego into the dust we're still friends. Come on, I'll take you to the washing machine."

While Kerry washed her clothes, Steele made coffee and they drank it cozily at the breakfast bar. But as Steele asked her about her life in Oak View, she realized how dull it sounded and how dull *she* must seem to Steele. Unhappy, she reclaimed her clothes from the dryer then paused at the kitchen door.

"Does—does my dress really look like a shapeless knit sack?"

He glanced up sharply and his face softened at her uncertainty. "Kerry, that dress does nothing for you." The gentleness of his tone took the sting out of his words. "You're a young woman with a fantastic figure, Kerry. Why shroud it in a dress that would . . . well, suit your grandmother?"

Kerry groaned. "Is it *that* bad?"

"No, it's not that bad. Sometimes I exaggerate for effect. Creative license, it's called." Steele slipped off the stool and walked toward her. "At least now I know what's under the dress." He placed his hands on her hips and slowly drew her toward him. "A beautiful, desirable body."

"Steele," Kerry began nervously. "I have to get dressed."

"O.K., O.K.," Steele said with a self-mocking smile.

Kerry was ready twenty minutes before he was, and spent that time gazing out the wall-sized window at the city below.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Steele appeared in the living room, devastatingly handsome in a well-cut gray suit. Kerry went silent and shy all over again. What was she doing in New York City with a man like Steele Gray? She was hopelessly out of her element. Fervently, she wished herself back in Oak View, at the local Dunkin' Donuts with Howard Stover.

Steele seemed to sense her withdrawal. "Now don't clam up on me again, Kerry."

He casually took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his elbow. "Where shall we go first? We have a list of five of the trendiest night spots to choose from."

"You go," Kerry said swiftly. "We can tell the driver to drop me off at my hotel along the way."

"We're spending the evening—or what's left of it—together, Kerry," Steele said firmly.

His eyes flicked over her and his voice deepened on a husky note. "You look lovely, Kerry." He tilted her chin with his big hand. "Now smile for me."

Kerry made a feeble attempt at a smile. "That's a little better. Now let's go."

Back in the pink limousine once more, Steele reached for Kerry and pulled her away from the window to the middle of the seat, close beside him. "I have an idea, Kerry. Let's scrap the convention's nightclub tour and see New York our own way."

"Can we?" Kerry asked doubtfully.

Steele gave a wicked chuckle. "Who's going to stop us? Unless you want to go to those places?"

"Not especially. Nightclubs aren't really my thing."

"Somehow I'd figured that out. And I've been into that scene longer than I care to remember. I'm ready to try something different." Steele tapped the glass partition separating the back seat from the front. "Driver, take us to Central Park."

As they sped through the streets of Manhattan, Steele moved closer and closer to her, his hands roaming through her hair. Then he kissed her, a deep, drugging kiss that drove everything from her mind. Kerry clung to him, her body moving in a primitive, erotic rhythm that would have shocked the reserved, everyday Kerry O'Kaye.

Neither of them was aware when the limousine pulled to a stop. It was only

when the driver gave a light tap on the window and announced "Central Park" that they slowly drew apart. For a long moment, Steele and Kerry stared at each other, dazed. Then Steele flung open the door of the car. "Come on." He tugged at her hand, half pulling her out of the limousine.

"What are we doing here? Where are we going?" Kerry followed him, half running to keep up with his long-legged strides. She was smiling in the darkness, at nothing and nobody, but she couldn't seem to help herself. She felt giddy and lighthearted and free.

"We're going to take a ride in a hansom cab," Steele told her. He paid the driver and helped her into the open carriage drawn by a rather tired-looking horse. "This is something I'd always considered too corny and touristy for my smooth macho image."

They spent the drive in companionable silence, Kerry's head on Steele's shoulder, his arm protectively around her. The ride was over far too soon for Kerry. She could have spent the rest of the night in Steele's arms under the night sky in the corny, touristy open carriage.

The chauffeur seemed relieved to see them when they returned from their unscheduled foray into the park. "Maxwell's Plum?" he asked hopefully.

"The Staten Island Ferry," Steele corrected.

The pink limousine delivered them to the foot of Manhattan where they boarded the ferry. As it pulled out into the harbor, Kerry stood beside the railing, watching the shoreline recede into the distance. Steele stood behind her, his body surrounding hers like a protective shell.

"It's wonderful!" Kerry sighed happily. "Like an ocean voyage."

"Kerry," he said huskily and she turned in his arms, facing him. Tenderly, his lips caressed her temple and her heart



began to race. Then he possessed her mouth completely, his tongue ardently seeking hers. The warm, dull ache in her abdomen seemed to erupt into a blazing volcano, sending spurts of hot lava coursing through her veins, melting her, spinning her out of control. Kerry clung to him, unable to do anything else. It was her own shocking weakness that jolted her back to sanity. With a cry, she wrenched out of his arms and broke away, her whole body trembling with emotion.

"I—I don't know what you must think of me," she choked. A hot blush of shame swept over her as she relived her wildly uncharacteristic behavior. She felt a stranger to the passionate creature she had become in Steele's arms.

"What's wrong, Kerry?" He reached for her, to take her back into his arms. Kerry deftly stepped away from him. "I don't like making a spectacle of myself," she said lamely.

"Come back to my apartment, Kerry. We'll have all the privacy we could want."

Kerry shivered. It took all her willpower to tell him, "I don't want to go to bed with you, Steele."

Steele frowned, obviously perplexed. "Are you trying to play hard to get, Kerry? I didn't imagine your response to me. You wanted me as much as I wanted you."

"I'm not playing games, but I'm not about to jump into bed with you on a few hours' acquaintance. I—I just can't, Steele."

He made no reply. Kerry guessed he wasn't pleased, but he stood beside her at the railing and made no further attempts to argue. "Kerry, are you hungry?" he asked at last. "Would you like to have an early breakfast? We could go into the Village..."

"I am hungry, Steele," she heard herself reply. "An early breakfast sounds very appealing."

It was wrong to prolong their time

together, Kerry silently argued with her unpredictable inner self, who had just arranged to do exactly that.

"I know where you live and what you do. Fill me in on the rest," Steele said later as they ate their breakfast.

"There's not much to tell." Kerry laughed self-consciously. It was difficult for her to talk about herself, so instead she talked about her sisters, who were far more interesting topics of conversation, Kerry thought. Monica, her glamorous older sister, had gone to California and done a few television commercials before meeting and marrying her successful doctor-husband. Erin and Ellen, the beautiful twins, were airline stewardesses, based in Washington, D.C. The twins knew congressmen and diplomats on a first-name basis; they'd even dated some of them.

"But what about you?" Steele pressed. "I'm sure you've had your share of glory, too, Kerry. Tell me about you."

"Well, uh, I was valedictorian of my high school class," Kerry said in apologetic tones. But she hadn't had a date for the senior prom, and that had devalued her academic success for the O'Kays.

Steele frowned thoughtfully. "Valedictorian? What about college?"

"I had a part-time job at the library and spent the rest of my time studying." She blushed suddenly and unexpectedly. "I wanted to graduate summa cum laude."

"And did you?"

The blush deepened. "Well, yes."

"Summa cum laude, with highest honors? I'm impressed, Kerry O'Kaye."

Kerry was anxious to steer the conversation away from herself. "How did you start writing, Steele?" she asked quickly.

"I always enjoyed reading spy-adventure stories," he began with a smile. "And after I graduated from college — not summa cum laude, I might add—I

went to Europe and managed to work my way around the world."

"By the time I returned to the States, I was twenty-five, and I decided that it was time for me to begin some sort of career. I couldn't stand the thought of being shut up in an office for the rest of my life, so I wrote a book, *Deadly Nightshade*, and it hit the best-seller lists. I've written eleven more over the years."

"Which have all hit the best-seller lists. You've been very successful," Kerry murmured.

"Yes." Steele nodded. "But, lately, I—" He broke off with an abrupt laugh. "I don't want to bore you further."

Kerry stared at him steadily, her eyes serious. "Lately you've been dissatisfied?" she prompted sympathetically.

"Crazy, isn't it?" Steele gave a self-deprecatory laugh. "I want to write a serious novel, completely removed from the spy-sex-adventure genre," he blurted out. "But I can almost see my publishers go into apoplexy."

"Who cares? Do it anyway, Steele. It's not as if money is an issue with you."

"No, my investments will keep me rich even if I never write another word. But suppose... I don't have the necessary talent?" He looked sheepish and uncomfortable, as if he were unaccustomed to admitting to doubts or weakness of any kind.

"You won't know unless you try, Steele."

He gave her a crooked grin. "There would be a certain satisfaction in making those highbrow literary critics deal with me as something more than, quote, 'a hack writer of pulp fiction.' End quote."

"I'd like to see you make the front page of *The New York Review of Books*," Kerry enthused.

Steele frowned and lapsed abruptly into silence, studying the coffee in his cup

with the intensity of a student cramming for final exams.

"What's wrong, Steele?" Kerry asked with concern. He'd withdrawn so suddenly, so unexpectedly.

Steele signaled the waiter for the check. "Nothing at all. You must be exhausted," he said brusquely, not looking at her. "I'll tell the driver to take you back to your hotel."

Back in the limousine, Kerry and Steele sat at opposite ends of the seat. Neither of them spoke as they sped through the pre-dawn darkness. The silent ride seemed endless, but the limousine finally stopped and the driver climbed out to open the door for them. They both blinked in surprise; they were back in Central Park.

The driver beamed with delight. "I figured you two would want to watch the sun rise over the park. It seems like the sort of thing a couple who takes handsome cabs and ferryboats late at night would like to do."

Steele smiled at the driver, then at Kerry. "You're right," he said. "That's a wonderful idea."

The driver gave a knowing nod and returned to the pink limousine. Steele took Kerry's arm and led her through a small grove of trees sheltering a long wooden bench where they sat down.

Steele heaved a heavy sigh and reached for her. "Come here, Kerry." She did not come to him willingly; he had to drag her into his arms. "It feels so good holding you," he said huskily.

Kerry remained stiff and unyielding in his arms and Steele sighed again. "Kerry, back in the restaurant... sometimes I get moody." A slight laugh. "Chalk it up to artistic temperament."

"You don't have to make excuses," she mumbled, trying to pull out of his arms. "You were bored. I—I've been known to do that to people. It wasn't your fault."

Steele looked troubled. "Is that what you thought? That you'd bored me?"

Kerry saw no reason to repeat herself. She gave a stiff little nod. "Oh Kerry!" He pulled her closer. "You couldn't be more wrong. I wasn't bored at all! I was feeling . . . well, threatened."

"Threatened? By me?"

"Kerry, I've never mentioned my dissatisfaction about my career to another living soul. Suddenly, I found-myself telling you things I'd thought about only in the small hours of the night. And you were too perceptive by half, Ms. Summa Cum Laude. How did you guess my most deeply kept secret ambition is to appear on the cover of *The New York Review of Books*?"

She hadn't bored him! The revelation sent Kerry's spirits soaring. She relaxed in his arms, leaning against the solid wall of his chest.

"Friends again?" Steele smiled down at her and she returned his smile.

"Friends again."

They continued to gaze into each other's eyes until the atmosphere began to shift from that of shared understanding to one of excruciating awareness. The tension was back, but it was a different kind of tension, a sharp, steadily building sexual tension.

"Kerry," Steele's voice was low and urgent and sparked an immediate flame within her. He brushed his lips along her jawline, lingering at the corner of her mouth.

"Come home with me, Kerry," he whispered against her mouth. "Please, honey, I need you so."

Kerry lay in his arms, her senses reeling. "Do you, Steele?" She knew she needed him in a way she had never before experienced, in a way that went far beyond the physical. Did Steele feel that profound need, too?

"Kerry, sweetheart, you know I do."

It was the way he moaned her name that convinced her. "Yes, Steele," she whispered. "I will."

Once back in his apartment, Steele carried her into his bedroom, placed her on the bed, then flicked a switch that instantly filled the room with soft lights and music.

"Wow," Kerry said. "I'm impressed."

Steele sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her down alongside him. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he began to laugh, then gazed at her thoughtfully. "Do you know I've never laughed with a woman in the bedroom before?"

"I'm not surprised. Such a scientific setup demands to be taken very seriously."

"Oh, Kerry!" He laughed again and pushed her back on the mattress. Their eyes met and locked and the laughter died in his throat. Kerry saw the desire burning in the blue depths of his eyes and was unable to tear her eyes away from his face. His mouth drew nearer and slowly, slowly her lids closed until she was enveloped in a velvet darkness with his lips upon hers. Their kisses were long and slow and deep.

She felt his fingers tug at the zipper of her dress. With one deft movement, he removed her dress and slip. He had removed his jacket earlier, and Kerry fumbled with his tie and the buttons of his shirt. Her fingers were unsteady, but Steele encouraged her with soft words and kisses.

"You are beautiful, Kerry." His familiarity with women's apparel seemed to underscore her own lack of expertise with men's. Her only intimate relationship had been with James. She had been too naive at the time to realize that he was a smooth, compulsive seducer of his hero-worshipping students.

Steele's smooth removal of her pantyhose heightened her sense of unease. He

must have done this so very many times before. Kerry froze as the parallels between Steele and James became appallingly apparent. Both were attractive and experienced with women; neither used words like love and commitment.

"Steele—I—I think I'm making a mistake."

"Kerry, no! It's so right between us, sweetheart. Don't you feel it, too?" Steele caressed her hips with long, possessive strokes. "I'm rushing you, aren't I? Don't worry, honey, we'll take it nice and long and slow." He gathered her closer, his voice reassuring, caressing.

Kerry felt an incredible anticipation and joy as he covered her body with his. He was the man she had been waiting for her entire life. She was no longer a besotted student in the throes of hero-worship; she was an adult and saw Steele's faults and loved him anyway. Had he fallen in love with her, too? Kerry let herself believe it was possible.

The emotional and physical climax left her replete with happiness. With Steele she had shared an ecstasy she had never known before.

"I love you, Steele," she said softly, snuggling deeper into his arms. She had never felt so close to anyone, had never known how rapturous it could be between a man and a woman. "I love you," she repeated, relishing the sound of the words. She wanted to hold him and talk for hours; never had she been so exhilarated. "Steele?"

There was no reply. It seemed that Steele had already fallen asleep. Kerry glanced at the bedside clock and was astonished at the hour. Seven A.M. They'd been up all night. And at this moment, she was too sleepy, too sated, to do anything else but close her eyes and fall soundly asleep beside Steele.

The ring of the telephone jarred Kerry

awake a few hours later. For just a fraction of a second, she was disoriented. What was she doing in this massive bed, covered by a blue silk sheet? And she was naked!

Everything came back to her in one shocking jolt. For the first time in her life, she had gone to bed with a man she'd only known a few hours and a documented womanizer at that!

She had thought she was in love with him! A hot flush scalded her. That was the worst recollection of all. And it was pure Kerry. Fantasizing, romanticizing, unable to deal with the notion of sex without love. Hadn't she learned anything from her affair with James? Apparently not, because she'd deluded herself all over again with Steele. Only this time it was worse, because she'd set herself up for a one-night stand.

Kerry sprang out of bed and snatched her clothes from the chair. The bathroom was a few feet off to the right, and she locked herself in to quickly shower and dress. There was still no sign of Steele as she tiptoed into the hall ten minutes later, but the sound of voices halted her in her tracks.

"Can we get a few pictures, Steele?" came an unfamiliar masculine voice. "In that famous bedroom of yours?"

Steele gave a laugh. "I don't think now is a good time, Mitch. Let's set up something for later in the week?"

"She's still sleeping, huh?" The unseen Mitch chortled. "Hey, that could make one helluva picture, Steele. The morning-after shot. I bet you put a great big smile on the doll's face."

"Forget it, Mitch. You have your interview, let's leave it at that."

Kerry heard Mitch say goodbye and waited in the hall, hoping she could get out the door unseen. She was trembling with rage. Steele had obviously boasted that there was a woman in his bed. But

what if he had told Mitch that it was the Romantic Novelists' Convention raffle winner? What writer could resist that story? Kerry was terrified. Her reputation would be ruined, just as her self-respect already was.

Steele saw her the moment she stepped into the living room. He smiled at her, which only further incriminated him in her eyes.

"Get out of my way." Kerry brushed past him, hating him, hating herself.

"Kerry?" He caught her arm, halting her.

Kerry pulled away from him. "I'm leaving right now." She spied her purse lying on an end table, grabbed it and headed for the door.

"Wait, Kerry!" Steele rushed to the door and stood against it blocking her way. "Whatever is wrong, we can talk it out. Just tell me—"

"No!" Kerry shivered with shame and rage. "I just want to get out of here. Let me go, Steele."

"All right Kerry," Steele said softly as he opened the door and stood aside. "But we have to talk. I'll see you later at your hotel."

"I never want to see you again!" Kerry fought back her tears as she rushed down the hall to an open elevator that had just released a passenger. She collapsed against the wall as the elevator descended. If only Nina hadn't convinced her to come to the conference, if only she hadn't written that wretched novel in the first place. The manuscript! She'd left it in Steele's apartment and Nina had said it was her only copy. Oh, Lord she'd have to go back. Kerry shuddered as she pressed the button for Steele's floor.

He opened the door on the first ring of the bell.

Kerry stepped inside. "I came for the manuscript and then I'm leaving. So just give it to me."

"You're not leaving, Kerry. Not until we straighten things out between us." He caught her hand and pulled her toward the sofa. "Look it's right here on the coffee table. I'll go over it with you page by page, if you want. Just sit down and talk to me."

"It's not the manuscript," Kerry said coldly. "Weren't you listening last night when I told you my friend wrote it?" Her face flushed a sudden, deep scarlet. "I'd never even heard of half of that creepy, kinky stuff Nina wrote about."

Steele's eyes widened. "You *really* didn't write it?"

"I told you last night that I didn't," she snapped. And then comprehension dawned. "You didn't believe me! You thought that I did write it! That I—" she broke off with a gasp. "That's why you were so eager to go to bed with me, isn't it?"

Kerry picked up the manuscript, "Let me out of here, Steele Gray!"

"Not until we've settled a few things." He made a lunge for her, catching her by the arm.

"I am *not* a one-night stand," she gasped, pulling futilely away from him.

"Kerry, I don't consider you a one-night stand." Steele stared at her, shocked.

"You're right, I'm a few hours' stand, which is even worse. And you—you bragged about it!"

Steele gave her an incredulous stare. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I heard that Mitch person ask to take pictures of your bedroom this morning. And I also heard him snicker and say, 'She's still sleeping, huh?'"

"He just assumed there was a woman in my bed, and was making what he thought was a cool macho joke about it. But he didn't know *you* were here!"

Was he telling the truth? Kerry wanted to believe him, just as she wanted to believe that she meant more to him than a one-

night stand, that the loving passion they had shared was mutual and real. But Steele Gray was an urbane man-about-town; *she* might be prone to instant infatuation, but *he* could never be. Their lovemaking had meant no more to him than a few hours of pleasure; Kerry was sure of it.

She faced Steele squarely. "I want to go back to my hotel."

"That's it then. I don't grovel to any woman." Steele glared at her. "If you insist on leaving, I'll drive you back right now."

"Here's your hotel." Steele pulled his Porsche in front of the awning-covered section of sidewalk that sheltered a path to the door of the lobby.

"Thank you for the ride," Kerry said stiffly, reaching for the door handle.

Steele was staring straight ahead, not looking at her. "So... you're going home today. Maybe I'll call you there sometime."

"I have an unlisted number. Two years ago, a heavy breather started calling me at night. I had my phone number changed and unlisted and the calls stopped."

"Well, then, you'd better give me your number."

"No." She opened the car door. "Good-bye, Steele."

"I told you I don't grovel. I'm not going to beg you, Kerry."

"I—I don't expect you to." She closed the car door.

Steele glared at her for a moment, then suddenly pulled the Porsche away from the curb, tires screeching. Kerry rushed inside the hotel.

Nina greeted her at the door of their room, her expression holding speculation and avid interest. "Your night on the town lasted about eighteen hours. You must have had one helluva time, Ker."

Kerry dumped the manuscript into Nina's arms. "Let's go to the train station now, Nina."

Nina glanced from Kerry to the manuscript.

"Yes, he read it." Kerry took a deep breath. "He wasn't very encouraging, Nina."

"Not to worry. This morning I had breakfast with Joanne Green, the coordinator of the Romantic Novelists' Convention. She's also the editor of that romance novel trade newspaper, *Romantic Views*."

Kerry tensed. "Oh?"

"Last night I told Joanne that I was your best friend and she asked me to write an intimate account of your night on the town with Steele Gray for *Romantic Views*. Was she ever thrilled when I told her you hadn't come in at all last night!"

"I hate to disappoint you, but there isn't going to be any intimate account of my night on the town. I'm never going to mention last night again, and if you're truly my friend, you won't either."

"Wow," Nina exclaimed with wide eyes. "You must have had a helluva time!"

On Monday Kerry drove directly from school to a hairstyling salon where a man named Antonio cut her hair into layers that tumbled to her shoulders in stylish disarray.

Next she went to the Cherry Hill Mall, where she bought some clothes that could *never* be suitable for her grandmother. She selected shades of deep greens and bright yellows that seemed to change the color of her eyes to match the garment. Her new clothes emphasized the fine lines of her figure in a way her practical old styles never had.

She ended her shopping spree in a book store. After perusing her usual choices of paperback nonfiction, she found herself in front of a rack of Steele Gray's books. All were in paperback but one, presumably his latest, which was in hardcover

and entitled *Desire Most Deadly*. She carried it to the cash register and bought it.

She stayed up past two A.M. reading *Desire Most Deadly* from start to finish in one sitting. And the next afternoon she went back to the mall to buy all ten paperbacks in the *Deadly* series. At the end of the week she owned and had read every book.

Four fictional heroes appeared in the *Deadly* series in alternating books, and Kerry grew to know them all: Rodd Hardwick, Cole Steplewood, Jed Strager, and Derek Dollarhead. Kerry attributed every thought, word, and action of the four supermen to their creator. He was them and they were him.

Reading the sex scenes was particularly difficult for her as they brought Steele back so vividly. She knew she had better forget him once and for all because she would never see him again—but she was wrong.

On Friday, as she was watching her class at recess—there he was, tall and handsome, grinning at her in the morning sunlight.

“What are you doing here?” she asked approaching him.

“I had to come here, Kerry. I wanted to see you again. And it was certainly worth the trip. You’re even lovelier than I remembered.”

Kerry was momentarily delighted that he had noticed her new and improved appearance. Then she remembered. Hadn’t one—all—of his heroes said that complimenting a woman on her appearance bed? “You’ve made a wasted trip, Steele. We have nothing to say to each other.” She turned and headed back to the school building.

“I thought you might like to know that Joanne Green called me, on Tuesday,” Steele called after her. “She wants to feature our night on the town on the first

page of next month’s newspaper. She knows that you were with me all night, Kerry, and didn’t come in until well into the next afternoon. I didn’t tell her, but she knows.”

Of course she knew, Nina had told her so. And what had Steele told her? Kerry felt sick. “Wh-what did you tell her?” she asked, her voice unsteady.

“Give me the key and directions to your apartment, Kerry. I’ll wait for you there and tell you all about it.”

“You aren’t going to my apartment!” The blood was roaring in her ears. What was she going to do? Steele didn’t care if the readers of *Romantic Views* knew she’d gone to bed with him, but she . . . Oh, Lord, that newspaper story could cost her her job!

Steele was watching her. “I’m going to talk with you, Kerry.”

“I—I agree that we need to talk.” She swallowed hard. “I’ll meet you after school at the Ice Cream Shoppe on Oak Street. We can talk there.”

“Don’t you think we’re a little old to be meeting at the malt shop after school?” Steele teased. “Hey, is there a jukebox so we can jitterbug? Will you wear my letter sweater to the pep rally before the big game?”

“It isn’t f-funny, Steele. My reputation is at stake.”

“Dammit, Kerry, don’t cry!” He looked appalled.

“I didn’t tell Joanne Green a word of truth about our—uh—time together. I had a list of the night spots we were supposed to have visited, and I invented an evening for us at those places. Then I sent our driver a check to insure his silence.”

Kerry swayed toward him, giddy with relief. “Honestly, Steele?”

“Honestly, Kerry.”

The abrupt shrill ring of the school bell, signifying the end of recess, made her jump away from him. “I have to go in



now."

"I'll be at the ice cream place," Steele called after her. "Meet me there."

Later Kerry spotted Steele sitting alone in a booth in the Ice Cream Shoppe and joined him there, her expression grim. He had just ordered what he had admitted was his sixth cup of coffee when she sat down.

"Isn't there a place where we could have a little privacy?" Steele asked softly after Kerry had told the waitress that she didn't want anything.

Kerry swallowed, not trusting herself at all. "Why?" she asked, then flushed at his devilish grin. "I—I mean why are you here in Oak View?" She was making a mess of it. The little blond cheerleader in the next booth was handling her male companion with far more poise.

"I want you to come back to New York with me, Kerry," Steele told her, watching her intently. "We can drive up today and you can fly back on Sunday night. At my expense, of course."

"No," she refused automatically.

"Are you saying no to my paying your air fare or no to coming with me?"

"No to everything. I read your books, by the way."

If Steele was surprised by her seeming non sequitur, he gave no indication of it. "Which ones did you read, Kerry?"

"All of them. I bought them at the book store at the mall."

"You didn't have to buy them, honey, I would've given you copies." He gave a wry smile. "Surely you knew I'd follow you here. The way you left me insured it."

Kerry shook her head, incredulous. "I thought I'd never see you again."

Steele gave a disbelieving laugh. "You know damn well how much I wanted you last weekend, Kerry."

"I thought you'd forget it by Monday. Maybe even by Sunday night," she added.

Steele grimaced wryly. "I guess this is my cue to tell you that I've never spent a week like this past one. That I couldn't sit down to write without remembering something you'd said or the way you laughed or sighed"—his voice lowered—"or moaned when I touched you." He stretched his long legs under the table and they brushed Kerry's smooth nylon-clad ones.

"But the nights were the worst," Steele continued softly. "I literally ached for you. Not merely for a woman, Kerry. For you, only you."

Kerry caught her breath. Was he telling her that he wanted more than a few hours of physical pleasure with her? "You're rapidly becoming an obsession with me, Kerry O'Kaye," he told her, covering her hand with his.

*Obsession. Deadly Obsession.* Yes, she knew what he was up to now. In the novel, Cole Staplewood had been fixated on a voluptuously sexy Palestinian terrorist and, lamenting his unwanted passion, had decided to exorcise it once and for all. He'd plunged into a bout of hot lovemaking until he'd reached his saturation point.

"Kerry?" Steele's voice was husky and their eyes met and clung for a long moment. He reached across the table to take her other hand. Their fingertips had just touched when a large paper airplane landed in the middle of the table.

There was a loud shriek and much giggling as two teenage girls rushed to the booth to claim the airplane. "That's my history assignment," squealed the petite brunette. "Those animals made a plane out of it." The animals were three guffawing teenage boys wearing Oak View High Football shirts.

"Kerry, Isn't there anywhere we can have a little privacy?"

She had to smile at the martyred note in his voice. "I guess we could go to my apartment," she said slowly, and frowned at his sudden expression of glee. "We're just go-

ing to talk, Steele."

"Whatever else did you think I had in mind, Kerry?" he asked with exaggerated innocence.

"I like your apartment." Steele's gaze flicked over the yellow grasscloth on the walls and the assortment of wicker tables and chairs with their brightly colored cushions. He was standing in front of the wood slats and concrete blocks that comprised her bookshelves. All eleven of his books were neatly arranged in order of publication.

"So you really did buy them?" He removed the hardcover book *Desire Most Deadly* from the shelf.

"I read them all, too." She resisted the impulse to confess that she'd practically memorized the words and philosophy of his implacable heroes as well.

She handed him a pen. "Would you autograph them for me?"

"All eleven?" He gave a slight laugh. "Hmm, how shall I sign it?" He grinned wickedly. "Is this for your eyes only, Kerry?"

Her heart thumped. "Just sign, 'To Kerry, Best Wishes, Steele Gray.'"

"Hey, that's original. And so personal, too." But he wrote just what she requested, then put down the pen.

"So..." Steele glanced at his watch. "If you pack now, we can leave for New York and be there in time for dinner at nine."

"I'm not going to New York with you, Steele," Kerry said flatly. She wasn't going to cooperate in his efforts to make himself sick of her. "I'm spending the weekend here. I have plans."

Steele scowled. "A date?"

"Yes."

"Break it."

Break her weekly Saturday night dinner date with Howard Stover? "I can't do that, Steele."

"Unless you want to make it a threesome, you'll break that date, Kerry, because I'm spending the weekend with you. If not in New York, then right here in Oak View."

Kerry was utterly nonplussed. Steele plunked himself down in one of the wicker armchairs, his eyes glinting with defiant challenge. What did she do now? She'd never been in such a situation before. There had never been a man who had doggedly demanded her company. She stared at him, wondering if she were simply having a very strange dream. "Steele, why are you doing this?"

"Because you interest me," Steele said coolly. "Most women don't. I realize that's an unforgivably chauvinistic remark and I wouldn't dare utter it on *The Phil Donahue Show*, but it's true."

"But I'm not interesting," Kerry protested. "My sisters are more your type. Glamorous, exciting, sophisticated."

"I've already met them. Oh, not your sisters specifically, but their type. I've had over a dozen years of the women you insist are my type and I'm ready..." He paused, and their eyes met. "...For something else. For someone else, Kerry." Steele held out his hand to her. "Come here." She took his hand like one in a daze. Steele tugged her toward him, and seconds later she was in his lap. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. "Ah, Kerry, it feels so good to hold you. All this week I've thought of you, needed you."

Kerry couldn't say no to him. She wanted to please him, to give him whatever he needed to make him happy. Making Steele happy was suddenly the most important thing in the world to her.

Steele carried her into the bedroom. "Let me undress you, love," he murmured, kissing and caressing her as he removed her clothes. "My lover," Steele said huskily as he eased her back onto the

bed. "You're mine, Kerry. All mine."

Kerry was aware of his smooth technique, even as she kissed and clung to him. She knew she was dealing with an expert in the art of physical loving; his practiced caresses revealed that he had pleased many women.

Did it matter? a strange little voice inside Kerry's head challenged. She slipped her hands under his shirt to feel the hair-roughened warmth of his chest. He was with *her* now. The feel of him beneath her hands drugged her senses, and she moved her palms slowly around to the smooth muscled hardness of his back.

Steele tugged off his shirt, then fumbled with his belt. The sight of his trembling fingers gave him a vulnerability she found irresistible. He'd been so sure when he undressed her. Someday, she thought, she'd undress him that way. Then Kerry held out her arms, and he came to her, holding her and kissing her deeply.

His passionate response to her was enthralling. She wanted to wrap herself around him, to envelop him and make him a part of her forever.

*I love him.* The knowledge welled up from deep within her. Oh, Steele, I love you so, she thought. They kissed again and again, their kisses becoming even more urgent and intense. You're doing it again, came the strident voice of the rational Kerry, you're confusing sex with love. Was she? Steel wouldn't like that...

"Now, Kerry, darling. I can't wait any longer, my love," Steele groaned, and she lovingly opened herself to him. They were wonderful together, she thought dreamily, natural and good and oh-so-right. Their passion crested and swirled, sweeping them both away into the shimmering, golden depths of rapture.

Afterward they lay together, quiet and sated for a long time. "What are you thinking?" Steele asked at last.

"Just that I'm glad I'm here with you."

"The last time we made love, you told me that you loved me." Steele propped himself on his elbow and gazed into her eyes.

"You were asleep!" Kerry was aghast. "You didn't hear that!"

"I was almost asleep," Steele corrected. "And I did hear you, but I didn't feel up to dealing with it at the time. Now I—"

Kerry was blushing hotly. "You don't have to deal with it now, either. Please don't remind me what a naive, dim-witted idiot I was, Steele. Romanticizing a one-night stand! I'll never do it again."

Steele's hand abruptly stopped caressing her flushed cheek. "I thought you were adorable," he growled in an ominously quiet tone. "Sweet and sincere. Utterly open and natural and it might interest you to know that a one-night stand is just that, Kerry. Once. I came after you, didn't I? We've been together more than one night."

Kerry thought about that. "I guess we've progressed to a fling."

"One has a fling in New York or Istanbul or the Cannes Film Festival," Steele said sourly. "Never in Oak View, New Jersey."

"Are you hungry?" Steele asked after a long silence. "I'd like to take you to dinner. Can you recommend any restaurants?"

"Oh, yes." Kerry was relieved to switch to a neutral topic. "I've been to a different restaurant every Saturday night for the past six months. Just tell me what kind of food you want and I can tell you where to find it."

"Italian?"

"South Philly. There are a number of places, each one better than the next."

"You—uh—go out to dinner every Saturday night?"

Kerry nodded. "Occasionally, we go to a movie afterward, but the meal is the

main event of the evening."

"Who is 'we'?" Steele asked a bit too casually.

"Howard and I. Howard Stover, a CPA who lives in Cherry Hill, not too far from here." Kerry felt a little strange discussing one man while in bed with another. But the women in Steele's books did it often.

"Howard Stover," Steele repeated, frowning. "He's the one you're going to break the date with tomorrow night."

"Yes," she sighed. "I'm going to break the date with him, and he'll probably never call me again."

"He'd better not call you again. I don't want any other man calling you, Kerry. I've never been possessive of any woman, but with you..." He shook his head, bemused. "Everything is different with you, Kerry O'Kaye."

They had dinner in one of Kerry's favorite Italian restaurants. As they talked, Kerry was amazed that they shared so many opinions and tastes. But as they were finishing their meal Steele said, "Don't take offense, but I've been wondering why a summa cum laude graduate is teaching kindergarten in a small town public school. It seems like such a waste."

"That attitude is just what's wrong with the public-school system. And I love my job, only..." Kerry sighed. "Only, sometimes I think I have it too easy."

"I know the feeling," He smiled at her. "What would you have different, Kerry?"

"I think about the challenge of teaching in the inner-city schools, maybe in Camden or Philadelphia."

"Or New York," Steele interjected. "What about private schools, Kerry? There are some excellent ones in New York, and with your qualifications, you—"

"If I lived in New York, I'd still want to

teach in the public-school system. I know it sounds corny and idealistic, but I'm committed to it."

"Corny and idealistic?" Steele frowned thoughtfully. "No, Kerry, you aren't at all. You have ideals and principles and I respect you for them." He reached across the table to take her hand in his.

Later they walked to the car, which was parked a few blocks from the restaurant. It was understood between them that Steele would spend the night with her. They stopped at an all-night drugstore, where he bought a toothbrush and some shaving supplies.

Holding hands, they entered Kerry's apartment. Her body was throbbing with a sweet ache. Steele drew her to him and kissed her lightly. "Shall I carry you to bed, sweetheart?"

Kerry melted against him, feeling warm and weak with desire. "Yes, please, Steele." He picked her up and carried her into the quiet, darkened bedroom.

The insistent ring of the telephone the next morning jarred Kerry from her languid contentment as she lay in Steele's arms. "I think it must be Nina, I'm afraid she's got another manuscript she wants you to read."

Steele cursed and put the pillow over his head. Kerry picked up the receiver...and almost dropped it at the sound of her grandmother's voice. "Grandma!" She gasped and went cold all over. It could only be something terrible at eight o'clock on a Saturday morning.

"What's wrong, Grandma?" Kerry held her breath.

"Nothing's wrong. We're going to have a celebration, child. Your sister Erin's beau has given her a ring. He's a young man by the name of Tom Sommers. I believe your mother said he was a social worker down there in Washington, D.C."

Grandma O'Kaye talked on. "Erin is bringing him home to meet the family. They should be arriving about one o'clock. Uncle Jack and Aunt Anne are having a party for them tonight—and, of course, you have to be there."

"I'll be there, Grandma. Thanks for calling."

"You're going to your family's," Steele surmised as Kerry replaced the receiver in its cradle.

She nodded. "It sounds like my sister Erin has gotten herself engaged to a social worker," she told him wonderingly.

"I'm going with you. Let's take a shower and get dressed." Steele kissed her shoulder and gently pushed her from the bed. "We can grab some breakfast along the way."

Kerry was stunned when Steele insisted on accompanying her to Wilkes-Barre. None of his heroes had ever gone to a small town to meet a woman's family. Watching Steel and her family was another eye-opener. Kerry felt like Alice fallen down the rabbit hole. It should be the beautiful Ellen or Erin with the handsome, charismatic Steele—not her. But Steele, miraculously, seemed indifferent to Ellen's charms and Erin was obviously deeply in love with Tom who, unlike the men Erin and Ellen had always dated, was not handsome or rich and famous.

Steele stood up abruptly in the middle of a conversation with Ellen, who was flirting with him shamelessly. "My knee is getting pretty stiff from sitting. An old football injury," he added to the startled O'Kays. "I'd like to go for a walk." He held out his hand to Kerry. "Coming, honey?" It was the first she'd heard of his old football injury, but Kerry took his hand and scrambled to her feet.

Ellen stood up, too. "I could use some exercise myself. I'll come with you."

Steele gave her his most charming smile, the one Kerry had seen him flash at

the Romantic Novelists' Convention banquet. And then, in the most pleasant and amiable tone imaginable, he said to Ellen, "Not this time, Ellen. Kerry and I would like to be alone for a while."

Steele whisked Kerry out of the house. "An old football injury?" she asked skeptically.

"It acts up at the most convenient times," Steele said, grinning. "Let's walk to that newsstand we passed on the way here." They stood together on the sidewalk in front of the house. "I think it was about two or three blocks down the road."

Kerry gave a reminiscent smile. "We used to blow our allowances there regularly on candy and comic books." Her smile faded. "Steele, don't you...like Ellen?"

"She's a man-eater," Steele said bluntly. "She was coming on to me with all the subtlety of a Mack truck."

He bought them each a chocolate bar at the newsstand, and they munched on the candy as they walked back to the house. "Kerry, when will the school term be over?" he asked suddenly.

"In two weeks. Our last day is the fifteenth."

"I was hoping it would be sooner. I'm already tired of weekend commuting, honey. I want you with me all the time."

Kerry's heart somersaulted in her chest. "All the time?" she repeated, not daring to believe what she'd heard.

"I want you to spend the summer with me, sweetheart. I have a summer place in upstate New York, in the Thousand Islands area near Clayton. I'm going up there to write and I'm taking you with me."

Kerry sighed, depressed that she must refuse. And she did have to refuse, didn't she? "Steele, I can't go with you. I always find a job during the summer months to help me keep up with my expenses."

"I'll take care of your expenses. I want to take care of you, sweetheart."

They had reached the O'Kaye house. Kerry stopped at the front gate which opened to the red brick front walk. "I can't let you do that, Steele."

"Look at it this way, Kerry. You'll be doing the cooking and some light house-keeping as well as keeping a temperamental, impossible writer on the track. You'll more than earn any expenses I pay for you."

"A sleep-in housekeeper," Kerry murmured. "With emphasis on the sleep-in part." If only he hadn't mentioned paying her. She knew all about his ideas on paying women to live with him. Jed Strager had cynically outlined it in *Deadly Midnight*. Strager was leery of being sued for palimony and had discovered a fool-proof method to avoid it. He simply paid his live-in lovers a salary and kept the canceled checks as proof of payment.

"Sweetheart, you're my lover, my woman. I have to have you with me. Make your demands. I'll meet them."

Demands, Kerry thought grimly. She was too much in love to demand marriage as the price of her going to the island with him. But she wasn't about to be paid for her services either! "Steele, I can't spend the summer with you."

"Kerry, you can." He smiled confidently. "And you most certainly will."

Erin's engagement party was a huge success and Steele seemed to enjoy it until Cousin Patricia's identically dressed three-year-old twin boys were presented and everyone was commanded to guess which was which.

"I don't think that look-alike business is healthy," Steele frowned thoughtfully to Kerry as they sat on the sidelines. "If I had twins, I'd never let them play for attention by accentuating their sameness. I'd stress their individuality."

"Ann Landers and Dear Abby would agree with you."

Steele gave a self-mocking laugh. "Listen to me, expounding on the way I'd bring up kids. I should put my money where my mouth is, so to speak, and have a few of my own. I think I'm finally mature enough to handle fatherhood. In fact, I think I'd enjoy it." He watched her, his blue eyes intent.

Kerry was remembering *Deadly Inconvenience*. "Unfortunately, you can't clone yourself. Rodd Hardwick thought cloning was the only reasonable route to fatherhood," she reminded him lightly. "Pregnancy is a steel trap. Gentlemen, beware," he said."

"Steel trap... Kerry, that's an atrocious metaphor. Nina must've written it, not me!"

"No, no, you did. It was in *Deadly Inconvenience*. Rodd Hardwick said it to his naive young sidekick."

Steele scowled. "Do you happen to know the page number, too? Dammit, Kerry, that—"

Just then Aunt Anne interrupted and dragged Steele off to meet her daughter Molly, a budding writer. Kerry didn't see him again for an hour and when she did, he was surrounded by her little cousins who refused to relinquish him.

Finally everyone gathered for a sing-along around the piano and the party broke up shortly after midnight. Steele, exhausted, retired to the local Holiday Inn and Kerry settled into bed in the room she had once shared with Monica. There was a soft knock at the door, and Ellen and Erin came in.

"I have a feeling you're going to beat me to the altar, Kerry," Erin said as she flopped down on Monica's empty bed. "Mother wants me to have a big white wedding, but Steele told Tom he would never go through such a circus. I bet you'll

probably slip away and get married quietly."

It was heady stuff, having the twins think that Steele was seriously interested in her. But Kerry was too honest to keep up the pretense. "I think Steele means that *any* wedding is a circus that he'd never take part in," Kerry said with a sad smile. "I'm afraid you've misinterpreted Steele's presence here, Erin. The whole family has. He isn't serious about me. We're having an—" She gulped, then decided she could certainly be candid with the worldly twins—"an affair. Steele isn't interested in lasting commitment. If you've read any of his books, you'll know how he feels about settling down. As he said through Cole Staplewood, 'The concept of monogamy is an obscenity.'"

"Kerry, that's a character in a book!" Erin objected. "I've seen the way Steele Gray looks at you. He practically eats you up with his eyes. The man is in love with you, Kerry. Trust me to know the signs."

"He asked me to spend the summer with him," Kerry blurted out. She didn't mention that he'd offered to pay her to do it. Not even the twins would approve of that.

"Hold out for a ring," Ellen advised. "That's probably what he expects you to do. And I'll wager a month's salary that he's prepared to pay the price."

"I don't want a man to feel that he's paying some sort of price to marry me, Ellen. That's no way to begin a marriage—not that Steele wants marriage, at any price," Kerry hastened to add.

Erin gave a thoughtful frown. "It might be a better strategy *not* to hold out for a ring at that. Agree to spend the summer with him, Kerry. He'll be amazed that you didn't demand marriage—he's undoubtedly expecting it from a sweet, family-oriented schoolteacher like you. He'll begin to feel guilty, he'll feel as if he's compromising you. After all, the guy

is in love with you, Sis. Within two weeks on that island, he'll propose to you."

"Erin, I know he's not going to marry me."

"We'll see about that. If I don't hear from you or from Mother that you're engaged to Steele within two weeks after your arrival on that island..." Erin's smile was distinctly devious. "The man will hear from me."

Kerry gave her sister an affectionate smile.

"You're very quiet," Steele observed the next afternoon casting a side-long glance at Kerry as he guided the Porsche through the lanes of traffic on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. They were on their way back to Oak View; the family weekend in Wilkes-Barre was finally over.

"Have you thought about spending the summer on the island with me, Kerry?"

"A little," she lied. In truth, she'd hardly thought of anything else. "I'd have to keep it a secret from the family, except the twins, of course. I mentioned it to them."

"And they agreed you should stay with me," Steele surmised smugly. "I knew they would. They're modern women."

"I make my own decisions, Steele," Kerry told him. He wouldn't look so pleased with himself if he knew that the modern women were plotting the loss of his freedom. "And anyway, I'm a—a modern woman, too."

Steele laughed. "Oh, no, sweetie, you're an old-fashioned one."

Kerry was suddenly irate. "I'm having an affair with a man who doesn't love me, aren't I? I'm contemplating lying to my family about my whereabouts and spending the summer with my lover. Can you get any more modern than that?"

"Here it comes." Steele drew a sharp intake of breath. "Okay, Ms. O'Kaye. Let's have it. I'm ready and waiting."



Kerry stared at him. "For what?"

"Ha! You've probably been rehearsing all weekend. You've tried to lay a guilt trip on me, that's step one. Now kindly proceed to the second step. I don't care for long, drawn-out ultimatums."

It came to Kerry in an unexpected flashback. Ellen, advising her to hold out for a ring. Apparently, Steele was on the same wavelength as her younger sister.

"Kerry, talk to me, dammit!" Steele was gripping the steering wheel with white-knuckled intensity. Would he really marry her to get her to his island for the summer?

"I haven't decided whether or not to go to the island with you, Steele," she heard herself say coolly.

"But—"

"And when I decide, I promise you'll be the first to know."

He didn't pressure her any further. In fact, he seemed nonplussed by her response. They completed the remainder of the drive in silence. By the time Steele swung the Porsche in front of Kerry's apartment building, it was nearly six o'clock. He opened the car door for her and helped her out, then carried her suitcase to the door of her apartment, the very model of politeness and decorum.

They stood outside the door, suddenly awkward with each other.

"I'd invite you in for some dinner, but I don't have any food." Kerry was staring at her shoes. "I usually go grocery shopping on Saturdays and—"

"Yesterday you didn't," Steele finished for her. He paused, watching her, as if waiting expectantly. When Kerry said nothing, he heaved a sigh. "I should head back to New York anyway. 'I'll call you tonight, Kerry.'"

"Do you—do you have my number?" she asked. This wasn't the way she wanted them to part. She wanted him to be smiling, to be warmed by the passionate mem-

ory of her kisses.

"I copied it from the phone," he called, hurrying down the stairs.

Steele called Kerry that night and every night that week, but he made no mention of seeing her on the upcoming weekend, nor did he mention the summer on the island. Kerry felt unsure and off balance. Her life seemed empty and void without him. Friday night she watched television alone. Saturday morning after going to the laundromat, she came back to her apartment wondering how to kill the endless hours that loomed ahead.

"It's about time you got back," came a deep voice from the bedroom, and Kerry gasped the moment she recognized it.

"Steele!" She rushed into the bedroom to find him lying in her bed. Only the thin cotton sheet covered his nakedness.

"I've been waiting here for nearly an hour and a half. Where have you been, Kerry?" And then he held out his arms to her. "God, I've missed you, honey." The gruffness was gone from his voice.

Kerry ran into his outstretched arms.

"Let's spend the whole weekend right here, just like this." Steele purred like a contented jungle cat as he and Kerry lay wrapped in each other's arms.

"I'm so happy you're here, Steele. I didn't think I would see you this weekend." The gloomy memories of last night's loneliness were instantly obliterated.

"I had a dinner meeting last night." Steele stroked her hair. "And I decided to surprise you by arriving unannounced. Your landlady graciously let me in."

"You must have charmed her. Mrs. Quinnen never graciously does anything."

Steele grinned. "She is rather formidable at that. I'd better get a key made for this place. Next weekend I want to come down early Friday to help move

your things to the island."

"Steele, I—I still haven't said that. I'll go."

"You know you want to come with me, Kerry. There's nothing to keep you from saying yes." He watched her, his eyes agleam with anticipation.

She took the plunge, throwing away years of caution and analytical reserve. "I'll come with you, but I can take care of myself. I don't want any of your money."

He stiffened. "What are you talking about, Kerry?"

"I'll stay with you because I love you," she whispered. "I don't need to be paid for that."

"You told me you loved me the first time we made love," he said softly. "And I—"

"I know you didn't want to deal with it then," Kerry interrupted quickly. "And you don't have to deal with it now, either. I'm not trying to pressure you into saying something that you don't mean."

"But, honey, I—"

"I love you, Steele." Kerry had no intentions of arguing with him. She nibbled languorously on his neck. It was wonderful to openly confess her love to him. She'd made her commitment and she felt marvelously free.

Steele's summer house was located on a small island in the St. Lawrence River, one of over a thousand islands that constituted the aptly named Thousand Islands area. Steele's retreat was a beautiful little island, complete with tall oaks and pines, a rocky beach, and clumps of colorful wildflowers. He had a small dock and boathouse to house his two boats on one side of the island. The house itself was nestled between the trees in the center of the island and commanded a breathtaking view of the river.

There was a generator for electricity, but they had no telephone and were a

half-hour from town by boat. The island's inaccessibility made it an ideal place for uninterrupted writing. Kerr didn't mind her hours of solitude. She read or swam or did needlework. She picked wild berries and baked blackberry pies for Steele.

Weekdays, Steele would work until late afternoon and then go for a nude swim in his heated pool. "Please honey, don't be so shy, join me," he'd beg and finally she did. Or rather, Steele climbed out and got her. He took off her clothes and carried her into the deep end with Kerry's leg wrapped around his waist.

She tightened her legs around him, and the sensitive skin of her inner thighs were grazed by his hair-roughened skin. She felt open and vulnerable to him and she whispered his name. His hands slid down the curves of her body to the rounded firmness of her bottom.

Aroused as she was, Kerry hung on to her sanity long enough to realize that something was missing. Something vitally important. "Steele—we're not...safe."

Steele held her fast. "So what?"

His words jogged Kerry's memory. In fact, she'd read this conversation somewhere. The passage came back with startling clarity. It was from *Deadly Inconvenience*.

Suppose she decided to risk it just this once and became pregnant? Kerry was rigid. If that happened, she would symbolize that steel trap Steele so abhorred. She shivered. It was a situation she knew she couldn't handle.

"Kerry, my darling," Steele breathed as his mouth moved lightly over hers. But when he was about to kiss her deeply, Kerry turned her head so that his lip simply grazed her cheek. She took advantage of his momentary surprise to wrench away from him and swim to the side of the pool.

"Kerry!" he called plaintively. "Com

back here!"

"I'm not going to be anyone's steel rap," Kerry called over her shoulder as he hurried into the house. "You'll thank me for this nine months from now."

"Oh, damn! Not Hardwick again!" Steele followed her into the spacious beige and chocolate-brown bedroom. "It may interest you to know that Hardwick becomes a husband and father and retires in his last *Deadly* book. His future will find him mowing his lawn in Connecticut and driving his kids to soccer practice."

Kerry knew he was joking. "Your readers would revolt if that happened. They'd rather see him gunned down by the KGB in the line of duty."

"Hey, who's writing this book anyway?" Steele laughed as he scooped her up in his arms. Kerry squealed as he dropped her onto the bed and flung himself down beside her. They wrestled with each other, laughing, until Kerry was pinned beneath him. Their eyes met and the laughter ended. "Kerry," Steele gazed down at her with liquid blue eyes. "You know that I...care for you very much."

What did he want her to say? Kerry searched his face, perplexed. She'd already told him that she loved him. Too many times.

"Aren't you going to ask me how much care?" Steele asked at last, his voice a trifle impatient.

Aha, so *that* was the expected response! Kerry stored the fact away for future reference. "I guess I missed my cue," she told him sheepishly. "It's not easy being a newcomer in Steele Gray's attalion of women. I promise I'll get it right the next time you ask."

She was startled by the sudden spark of deeper fury that blazed in his eyes. His mouth closed fiercely over hers without another word.

At the end of their second week on the land, Steele and Kerry made a Saturday

trip into the town of Clayton in the elegant Boston Whaler. They collected the week's mail, shopped for necessities, and stocked up on food for the coming week. After lunching in a sandwich shop with turn-of-the-century decor, they loaded the boat and headed back to the island.

Kerry put the groceries away while Steele sat at the kitchen table surrounded by his mail, several overflowing piles of it. Kerry's pile included just three pieces: a clothing catalog, her bank statement, and a thick letter from E. O'Kaye. It contained a letter from Erin, a plane ticket to Washington, D.C., and a newspaper clipping.

Kerry glanced over the clipping, an article detailing the District of Columbia's new program of all-day kindergarten sessions. The funding had already been approved, and three city schools had been chosen to hold the classes, which began in September. Erin's letter explained the plane ticket. She'd met the supervisor of the new program through Tom and mentioned Kerry's qualifications. The supervisor had been so impressed that she'd invited Kerry for an interview, all but assuring Erin that a teaching position was Kerry's if she wanted it. She glanced at the date on the ticket. It was for tomorrow.

Despite the passion of their lovemaking, the hours of shared companionship and warmth and fun and laughter, Kerry was under no illusions—like all good things, their affair would end. Undoubtedly in September. She'd managed to glean the information that Steele's summer loves never lasted into fall. Erin was offering her a lifeline to self-preservation.

Steele found her watching him, and saw the faraway look in her eyes. "Kerry, is something wrong at home?" he asked with concern.

"No, not at all. In fact, I have some very good news." She forced a bright

smile. "Read this." She stood and handed him Erin's letter and the newspaper clipping. "The program sounds perfect for me. Working with small children in the public school of an inner-city school system."

"I don't want to hear about it, Kerry." He stood and backed her slowly against the wall and trapped her there, towering over her. "I have other plans for you, darling."

Kerry was outraged. "I'm considering changing my job, where I live, my whole life, and *you* can't even be bothered to listen. *You* want to go to bed!"

He had obviously expected her instant and eager surrender. He thought he needed only to touch her to empty her head of everything but him. Knowing that she had fueled his expectations by her past behavior only added to Kerry's fury. She grabbed her bank statement and the catalog, and carried them into an unused bedroom, locking the door behind her.

"Kerry." Steele tapped lightly on the door. "Sweetheart, I have to talk to you. I—"

"I have work to do!" Kerry snapped. "I have to balance my checkbook." She ripped open her bank statement and glanced at the computer-printed record. And then dropped it with a gasp. According to the bank, ten thousand dollars had been deposited into her account during the past week! She knew she hadn't made a single deposit, let alone ten thousand dollars! She'd never deposited that much at one single time in her entire life.

She rushed from the room to find Steele, her anger forgotten in light of the shocking bank error. "We have to call the bank right now! There's been a mistake! Let's leave for Clayton immediately!"

"Kerry, honey, relax." Steele smiled down at her. "There is no mistake, sweetheart. The money is yours. I had it deposited into your account. It's yours to keep."

"You deposited that money?"

"Kerry, I know you made a financial sacrifice to stay with me this summer," Steele said quickly, watching her. "But I didn't realize how great a sacrifice until I happened to look in your checkbook after you'd paid your bills and—"

"You went snooping in my checkbook?"

"Sweetheart, I wasn't snooping. I've watched you writing out checks—you looked tense, worried. It occurred to me that you might be having trouble making ends meet without a summer job."

"So you decided to hire me," Kerry jeered. "You must have been getting worried, Steele. A woman, living here with you without being paid. A possible palimony suit must have flashed before your eyes. And there you would be—trapped with no canceled checks to present as evidence to the judge!"

"Dammit, Kerry, will you please give me a chance to—"

"Just for curiosity's sake, is ten grand the standard salary for your summer companions?" She was beyond anger now; she was wounded to the quick and wanted to hurt him as badly as he had hurt her.

"Shut up, Kerry!" Steele was angry now. "I'm tired of your misinterpreting everything I say and do. I'm sick of being mistrusted and condemned and of your making snap judgments without ever bothering to try to understand my motives."

"I understand your motives so well, I could teach a course on them! I did all the required reading—your eleven books!" Kerry cried. "And you're not the only one who is sick and tired, Steele. I'm sick and tired, too. I should have never gotten involved with you at all. But it's not too late for me to get out, and that's what I'm going to do. I'm leaving, Steele."

"Well, I sure as hell won't try to stop you," Steele said acidly. Kerry had never

seen him so cold. "I'll even be glad to take you off the island. But don't expect me to chase after you, Kerry. If you ever want to see me again, you're going to have to come crawling back. And that's a promise."

Kerry tossed her head proudly. She was going to survive the scene without crying, and she took courage from her self-control. "I'll never come crawling back to you, Steele. And that's a promise, too."

"There is no job interview? You've never met the supervisor? There is no job?" Shocked, Kerry gaped at her twin sisters with wide eyes.

"I told you that she wasn't going to like it, Erin," Ellen said nervously.

The three O'Kaye sisters were seated in the small living room of the twins' high-rise apartment in southwest Washington. Erin had picked Kerry up at the airport an hour before. But she hadn't dropped her bombshell until now.

"You mean you concocted this whole scheme to—to make Steele propose to me?"

"The man is in love with you, Kerry, but you're too shy to give him the necessary push he needs to propose. So I did it for you."

"Steele isn't going to propose to me, Erin. Our affair is over. We broke up the day I received your letter."

"He'll come back, Kerry," Erin interjected with her usual confidence. "Tom and I had a few problems along the way, but we worked them out. We once broke up for a whole two weeks, but it was just a temporary setback."

"But you and Tom love each other. Steele doesn't love me, Erin. And this is no temporary setback. It's all over between us." Kerry was surprised to find her cheeks wet with tears. "I don't know how I can possibly have any tears left." She managed a mournful smile. "I've been

crying nonstop since Steele dropped me off at the motel yesterday afternoon."

"I can't believe he doesn't love you." Erin frowned. "I was so sure! I've certainly had enough experience to recognize the symptoms of a man in love, and he displayed every damn one of them!"

"He tried to give me ten thousand dollars for spending the summer with him." Kerry admitted the humiliating truth to her sisters and watched their faces express their collective dismay. "I knew he didn't love me, but I didn't realize he thought that little of me. If only he could have trusted me, just a little..."

"He tried to *pay* you?" gasped Ellen, aghast.

"Oh, Kerry, I'm so sorry. For everything," Erin cried, and burst into tears herself.

Tom Summers arrived a half hour later to find the sisters still sniffing in gloom. He immediately took charge of the situation. "Everything seems worse on an empty stomach," he decreed, "I'll take all of you out for dinner."

"Oh, Tom, none of us feels like going out." Erin put her arms around Tom's neck. "But if you want to bring back a pizza..."

Tom left shortly afterward to order and fetch the pizza. While they were waiting, Erin poured four glasses of wine while Ellen tossed some napkins and paper plates on the small kitchen table. The doorbell rang.

Erin looked through the peephole, turned to them, and gasped. "Kerry!" Erin's eyes glowed like brilliant emeralds. "It's *him*. It's Steele Gray!"

Ellen seemed to be the only one capable of action. "Well, let him in!" She flung open the door and welcomed Steele warmly. Kerry and Erin stared at him and then at each other. "We were busy in the kitchen, Steele. I'm sure you'll excuse us..." Ellen grabbed her twin's arm and

dragged her from the living room.

"What do you want, Steele?" Kerry asked stiffly.

"Kerry, you have to marry me," Steele said, and there was a desperation in his voice that she had never heard there before. "The past twenty-four hours have been the most miserable of my life. I have to have you back."

"You told me I would have to come crawling back to you," she said wonderingly. Was he actually willing to marry her to bring her back to the island?

"Darling, I'm sorry I hurt you. That's why *I'm* doing the crawling, and deservedly so." Steele drew a deep breath. "Kerry, I should never have let you go. But at the time I was furious and—and hurt over your accusations about the money I'd put in your account. Sweetheart, I was *not* trying to stave off a palimony suit. I wanted you to have the money—no strings attached."

"No strings attached?" Kerry repeated doubtfully.

Steele groaned. "Well, maybe there were strings attached, but they were to bind you closer to me, darling. I wanted you to need me in every way possible; emotionally, physically, and financially, too. I want to take care of you, Kerry." He caught her hands and pulled her to her feet to stand before him. "You have to let me, Kerry. I love you."

"Did you decide that you loved me yesterday, after I'd gone?" she asked. She didn't want him so thoroughly enmeshed in Erin's trap, Kerry thought sadly. It really wasn't fair to him.

"Kerry, I realized that I was in love with you that first night I spent in Oak View with you. It seemed a natural progression to visit your parents that same weekend."

She felt a ray of hope and yet... "You loved me all that time and never told me?"

"I wanted to tell you then that I loved you, Kerry. I was ready to say the words, but for some stupid reason I expected you to drag them out of me."

Kerry nodded her comprehension. "Rodd, Cole, and crew would have behaved exactly the same way."

"Not those clowns again! Sweetheart, please stop confusing me with those swashbuckling idiots I created. Maybe I was like them at one time, but not anymore, Kerry. I've changed and grown. Part of the reason I was so furious with you yesterday was because you seemed to refuse to recognize the new me as different from my one-dimensional characters. Kerry, *I am* different from them now. I can finally tell the woman I love that I love her and want to marry her."

"Oh, Steele," Kerry sighed. "I'm sorry I hurt you. It's just that I was never sure where I stood with you. I latched onto your books in an attempt to make some sense out of why a man like you would ever look twice at someone like me."

"Darling, how could I resist you? I feel as if I've been waiting all my life for you, my love." He smiled down at her, and his blue eyes were glowing with love. "I've been a prize idiot, holding back with you. Say you'll forgive me and marry me."

"Of course I forgive you," she whispered, gazing into his eyes. "But I can't marry you. I'll come back to the island, I'll stay with you for as long as you want me, but—"

"Dammit, Kerry, you're going to marry me. We aren't returning to that island until we're man and wife."

"Steele, you've been tricked into proposing," Kerry took a deep breath. "It wouldn't be honest for me to accept your proposal under the circumstances."

"Kerry, what are you talking about?"

"The job that Erin wrote me about—I don't have it, Steele. I don't even have a job interview. The whole trip was a ruse

that Erin cooked up to get me away from you so you would realize how much you missed me."

She expected him to be angry or cold or sarcastic. She didn't expect him to laugh. "I have something for you, Kerry. Something I bought right after that weekend we spent with your family in Wilkes-Barre." He reached into the inner pocket of his suit jacket and removed a velvet ring box.

"This is for you, sweetheart. Now we're officially engaged." He slipped a square-cut emerald ring on Kerry's finger. "Erin didn't trick me into proposing with her scheme. I've intended to marry you since that weekend in Wilkes-Barre."

Kerry stared at him. "You have?"

"Kerry, I was going to propose sometime during the summer. In my mind, the

commitment had already been made."

"So that's why you were willing to chance the 'steel trap of pregnancy'?" It all made sense to her now.

"I still can't believe I wrote such an abominable metaphor. Are you *sure* you didn't get it from Nina?" He kissed the tip of her nose. "But, yes, Kerry, that so-called steel trap holds great appeal for me now. I'd love to make you pregnant with our child."

"And I'd love to *be* pregnant with our child, Steele." Kerry heaved a blissful little sigh. "And was marriage the plan you had for me? Were you going to tell me yesterday when I thought you wanted to make love?"

"The lady is truly Phi Beta Kappa material," Steele said as he kissed her soundly. ♥

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To understand much of what we're doing with respect to cancer research, you'd need a graduate degree in microbiology or biochemistry.

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# VENETIAN SUNRISE

*Successful businesswoman Rita Stewart, on an antique buying mission in Europe, has her sense of reality shattered when talented Frank Giordano shows her a view of Venice that seduces her into changing her outlook on life.*

KATE NEVINS

Her Baylor's Venice in one hand and her brown calfskin attache case in the other, Rita Stewart gazed upward in awe at the famous painted ceiling of the Villa Mandola. The soaring, luminous ceiling of the villa, which was now a museum, offered a glorious vista of very busy mythological beings painted in exuberant, glowing colors. But Rita couldn't see all the figures, because various irregularities in the ceiling's surface prevented full visibility.

Since the floor was clean, and the museum deserted, Rita removed her navy-blue suit jacket, spread it on the floor, and lay down.

Now, looking upward, she could see gods and goddesses previously hidden from view—and hidden for good reason Rita thought. She could also see shepherds and shepherdesses whose interest lay more in each other than in their sheep; plump, rosy cupids cavorting on fleecy golden clouds; and other sight

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glossed over in *Baylor's Venice*.

As she shifted her attention from the artist's subject matter to his technique, Rita felt a slight pressure on the soles of her feet. Raising her head, she sighted down the ruffles of her powder-blue silk blouse to the rubber soles of a pair of jogging shoes, approximately a men's size twelve.

What to do? she wondered. Obviously, the man had the same right as she to look at the ceiling in the best possible way. The chamber was small. Where else could he have lain? she asked herself as she sat up.

"Hi," he said cheerfully. "Looks as though we're soul mates." He pointed to their shoes, still touching, and then up at the ceiling.

"Appearances can be deceiving," Rita answered with an impish smile as, pulling her feet away, she got up.

He rose, too, all magnificently proportioned six feet of him. "Don't go. We've only just met. Do you always look at art in the...er...horizontal position?"

"No, sometimes I stand on my head," Rita tossed back, the laughter in her sea-green eyes meeting his.

But something very odd was happening to her. In her imagination, the man standing in front of her had turned into one of those centerfold deities *above* her, his broad chest garlanded with green leaves instead of white wool, his lean flanks unencumbered by corduroy or any material except marble-smooth, glistening skin.

Rita blinked rapidly several times to clear the image from her mind.

"You didn't get any plaster in your eye, did you?" he asked solicitously. "These old ceilings are flaky...as well as sexy. Here, put your head back and let me take a look."

Obedying him, Rita was almost overwhelmed by his clean, vigourously male scent as he came closer to her. Their thighs

touched. Her heartbeat speeded up and her knees grew weak.

This amusing, highly virile man was having an astounding effect on her. Her humdrum life of work and business appointments, of goals conscientiously set and always met, suddenly opened up into a panorama as colorful as the painted ceiling above them. Rita blinked—a little nervously.

She put her hand up to his, to push it away. Then she paused, her hand still on his, at the look that crossed his face.

So it is a two-way current, Rita thought with glee. Evidently, her painted-ceiling Adonis felt the same potent attraction she did.

Then she took her hand away and stepped back. "I don't think it's the *ceiling* that's flaky," she said with an amused, arch look.

He grinned insinuatingly. "I just wanted to be sure you hadn't been hit by one of Cupid's arrows."

"I wear an arrow-proof vest."

She bent down and scooped up her jacket and attache case.

"Do you really have to leave?" he asked. "We have a lot in common—like a taste for X-rated ceilings."

Head high, blushing a little, Rita walked out, past the brashest, whitest grin she had ever seen.

When she reached the street, she glanced at her watch and frowned. Amusing as her brief encounter had been, she was in Venice on business, and she had an appointment with the Contessa Rusconi all too soon. She set out confidently, but the maze of alleys and narrow twisting streets proved utterly confusing. Finally, after a half hour of futile wandering, she had to ask in halting Italian to be pointed toward the Grand Canal, where the palazzo was.

When she reached the canal, she stopped, momentarily forgetting her search at

the bizarre sight in front of her. Six easels had been drawn up on the quay like a wagon train. In the center, his back to her, a tall, dark-haired man, a fistful of brushes in his hand like a quiver of arrows, dashed furiously from canvas to canvas. Rita moved closer and peered at the easels.

"What kind of crazy, far-out art is that?" she said impulsively, and was surprised, herself, to hear her words spoken aloud.

The painter turned and flashed a dazzling smile at her. Rita closed her eyes a moment. *Oh, no! It's that guy who thinks I'm into porno art.*

"I'm glad you asked," he said, his big brown eyes smiling warmly into hers. "I thought you never would."

"I only just arrived," Rita pointed out dryly.

"But I've been waiting for you all my life! You must pose for me."

"For that?" Rita asked incredulously, pointing to the nearest canvas.

"*That*," the painter said proudly, "is my 'Venetian Sunrise,' in which I capture all the nuances of dawn over the Grand Canal." He lowered his voice in a husky murmur. "Just as I would capture all the nuances of *your* beauty."

Rita smiled, lowering her eyes. "I'm looking for the Palazzo Rusconi," she said. "Can you tell me how to get there?"

"You can get that information from any Tomaso, Riccardo, or Arrigo. What you really want is *me*, Frank Giordano; resident painter of the Quay Rusconi and personal guide to beautiful women with racy tastes in ceilings."

He leered comically at her, and Rita had to turn her face aside to hide her smile. He was funny, irrepressible, and terribly attractive. He was the kind of man any woman tourist traveling alone would love to meet. But she wasn't a tourist. Rita looked at her watch again.

She *had* to get to the Palazzo Rusconi.

"Come on," he commanded, serious now. "I'll take you to the palazzo myself."

Putting his brushes down, he cuddled her elbow with his hand and started to lead her along the quay.

They finally stopped in front of an ornate gray stone building with balconies on the two upper floors and tall windows divided by columns.

"This is it," Frank said, with an expansive sweep of his arm. "The beautiful Palazzo Rusconi. Do you want me to take you in? The contessa's a friend of mine."

"Thank you, but I think I can handle it."

"Good luck," he called out as her heels clicked across the cobblestones.

She raised her hand to the door knocker, then stopped a moment, and looked out over the canal. In the shimmering opalescent light, the buildings on its banks seemed to dissolve, then reassemble. The scene before her had the unsubstantial beauty of a fairyland and seemed about as real as the ripple of paint on canvas.

Then she raised her hand to the door knocker again. She was not here to be bewitched by Venice's beauty but to buy beautiful antiques.

The crash of bronze against oak echoed through the still afternoon air. Rita waited, then knocked again. And again. Frustrated and annoyed, she turned on her heel to march away and collided with an expanse of coarse, tickly wool that smelled pungently of paint and turpentine.

Frank Giordano's sleek, dark head fell back as he gave a long, hearty laugh. "I came back to tell you that the contessa's servant is deaf."

"Deaf servant or no, since the contessa knew I'd be here at this time, it seems the height of rudeness for her to keep me

waiting like this.”

“My offer’s still good. I’ll take you to the contessa myself,” he said with disarming gallantry.

“If it’s my only way of getting in, I accept,” she said resignedly.

He looked down at her, an amused glint in his eyes. “Okay, *signorina*, how should I announce you to the contessa?”

“I’m Rita Stewart. As I said, Contessa Rusconi is expecting me.”

“The contessa is a little absentminded.” He grinned beguilingly. “I may have to refresh her memory.”

Rita’s green eyes flashed with annoyance at the delay. “I’m an antique dealer on a buying trip in France and Italy. I have a shop on Madison Avenue.”

“And you’re here to buy antiques from the contessa?” Frank’s tone was tentative, questioning.

Rita looked at her watch pointedly. “Yes, Mr. Giordano.”

“Call me Frank,” he said expansively.

He reached over the wall and unlatched the garden gate of the palazzo.

“Contessa!” he called as he ushered Rita inside. “Your visitor is here. Alfredo didn’t hear her knock.”

The contessa walked toward them, shedding her gardening gloves and tucking them under a red plastic belt buckled around a green surgeon’s gown.

Rita glanced up at Frank, but it was obvious he wasn’t going to explain the contessa’s strange getup. He was looking at the slim, white-haired woman with admiration.

“I’m so sorry,” she said in American English. “Alfredo’s deaf as a doorpost. You must be...”

“Rita Stewart. I had an appointment.”

“Of course.”

The contessa led the way up a gravel path that pierced a mass of greenery more jungle than garden. As Frank walked beside Rita, he reached across her to

thrust aside some gigantic green specimen. The movement brought his thigh against hers and his hand in the lightest of contact with the upward swell of her breast under a powder-blue ruffle.

No wonder this American painter lives in Venice, Rita thought sardonically. Look at the fun he has with the tourists.

Rita shot Frank a dirty look and deliberately fell behind him. But then she found herself dwelling on his broad shoulders and his easy, narrow-hipped stride. Worse, the place where he had touched her seemed to be undergoing some kind of thermonuclear reaction.

When they finally reached a pair of curtained French doors at the rear of the palazzo, the contessa removed the surgical gown that swathed her spare figure.

“Won’t you have tea with us, Frank?” the contessa asked. “I promise to be a very proper countess.”

“Thank you, Contessa, but I’d better get back to my pick and shovel—otherwise known as a paintbrush and easel. I’ll be back later.”

“That Frank!” the contessa said when he left. “So talented and so stubborn. He could make a fortune painting the Grand Canal and the Doges’ Palace and St. Mark’s like every other young painter here and still have time for serious painting. But not Frank Giordano. He’s working on some new way of expressing light and color, and wouldn’t think of going commercial.”

Rita was amazed to feel her heart skip foolishly at this praise of Frank’s artistic integrity.

“I usually take tea in the sun parlor, on the opposite side of the palazzo,” the contessa said. “If you don’t mind a rather long walk for a cup of tea.”

As they went through room after room, Rita noticed bare spots on the walls, marks of recently removed fur-

niture on the carpets, curio cabinets with only one or two pieces in them—and those without interest or value. In fact, Rita thought with a sudden, sickening lurch of her heart, there wasn't anything of real worth in the palazzo.

Was she too late? Had the contessa sold everything?

"This is my favorite room." Contessa Rusconi ushered Rita into a room somewhat smaller than the others. "It has a view of the Grand Canal, and I never tire of watching all that coming and going."

The contessa motioned Rita to a chair near a table with an elaborate tea set, and poured them both tea as she chattered congenially. "When we've finished our tea," she said, "I'll show you my shop."

Shop? Rita repeated silently. The beautiful, aristocratic Contessa Rusconi had a *shop* just like any little bourgeoisie?

"It's where most of my things are now."

Rita had to fight for control so the contessa wouldn't see her consternation. The mystery of the bare walls and empty rooms was solved. *The contessa was—in a word—broke.* Or was she?

"You have your own shop?" she asked politely. "I had the impression from the antique dealer in Paris who referred me to you that you were selling just a few items directly from your palazzo."

"Oh, but, my dear, running a shop is so much fun. I've been so happy with it. A palazzo hung with old paintings and tapestries is a sterile place compared with the liveliness of the marketplace. Needless to say," the contessa added, "I buy in the antiques markets myself and sell what I buy. I also sell things for my friends. Speaking of which, do you have a place to stay in Venice?"

"I'll be at the Hotel Belloni," Rita replied.

"A hotel! Oh, my dear, they're so expensive in Venice. You'd be much

better off at a pensione, and friends of mine, Maria and Luisa Morosini, spinster daughters of dear Count Marco, run the best in town. I'll call Maria before you leave and tell her you're coming. Let me give you their address right now."

Just then, Frank entered the room and beamed happily at the contessa and Rita. "OK, enough work for today! I'm whisking Rita away to see Venice."

"Oh, but I came to Venice to work," Rita protested mildly.

"Nonsense, nobody comes to Venice to *work*, or at least not obviously to work. People come to Venice to enjoy the beauty and to *play*. Am I right, Contessa?"

The contessa smiled approvingly at Frank. "Frank's right. You must see Venice, and you could have no better guide than he. We'll make an appointment for you to visit my shop another time."

With a slight feeling of disorientation at the speed of events, Rita said good-bye to the contessa and left the palazzo with Frank.

When Frank and Rita reached the quay, the gilded angel on top of the bell tower of St. Mark's shone with a blinding light in the setting sun, and the dark clouds behind it were edged with gold.

The sun highlighted the blue-black tints in Frank Giordano's glossy hair and created a nimbus around the canvases he had left standing on the cobblestones.

He started to fold an easel, then looking at Rita with an inscrutable expression, he unexpectedly put it down. His hand went to her hair. He twined one of the ringlets that framed her face around his finger and held her by it, making her breath catch in her throat. "I'm not a portrait painter, but I meant what I said earlier about wanting to paint you. Just like this, with the sunlight pouring through your red-gold hair."

Rita closed her eyes against the somber, brooding look on the handsome face so close to hers. She set her lips firmly and told herself, you are Rita Stewart, a successful thirty-year-old woman with a classy antique shop on Madison Avenue. You are not an artist's model reclining half-nude on a chaise longue, so stop seeing this man as a shepherd without his sheepskin on a painted ceiling.

She stepped back, only to find that Frank still held her as if by a silken thread. She covered his hand with hers and said, "Let me go."

He released the gleaming ringlet, murmuring, "I'm not sure I can."

Slowly, they walked to the vaporetto stop. "I'm about to show you how the Italians live," Frank said. "We're going to a neighborhood where no tourist has ever set foot."

When they got off the vaporetto with a stream of working people, Rita laughed and said, "I think you were right. There's not a camera or flight bag in sight. Do you live in this neighborhood?"

Frank shook his head. "No, but I hang out here in the Castellano area a lot, because I like it. I'm renting a house on Burano. That's a little island about a half hour from Venice. Let's take a look at the markets here. The colors are terrific."

He led the way through a narrow street lined with small food stores and awninged fruit and vegetable stalls. "Look at those colors! The lemons are actually a pale gold. And catch the silvery sheen in the green olives. The beets are the purplish-red of an emperor's cloak."

The colors attracted her attention, too. Her eyes drifted upward to the beige stucco of the apartments above the stores and to the red tiled roofs. The wooden shutters at the windows were painted cerulean blue and ochre and parrot green. Banks of red geraniums fell gracefully over the peeling stucco from window

boxes.

She glanced at Frank, striding along beside her, his well-defined profile cutting the air. Maybe he was right about color, after all. It certainly lent vividness and immediacy to life. Rita made a wry little face at herself. Maybe you've been looking at faded old tapestries too long, Rita Stewart.

"I think we've earned a drink," Frank announced. "I know a great little restaurant around here."

They left the crowded, lively markets and walked to a spacious square where tables had been set up under blue and white umbrellas, and tubs of pink azaleas brightened the cobblestones.

"Frank! How are you? Long time no see." A young man in the white shirt and black pants of a waiter rushed out to greet them. Smiling with pleasure, Frank introduced the waiter to Rita as his friend Stefano.

Stefano bowed low in a courtly, old-world way. "I will give you the best table in the house," he said.

The Campari and soda Rita ordered was slightly bitter but more thirst-quenching than a sweet drink would have been. After a few grateful sips, she picked up her menu and soon found herself lost in page after page of delicious-sounding dishes.

Frank leaned forward and turned to a section of the menu she had missed. "Do you like seafood? Thanks to the Adriatic, Venice has some of the best."

"I love seafood."

Just then Stefano returned to the table, pad in hand. Frank ordered scampi for Rita and eels alla veneziana for himself. He added a risotta and salad, and asked for a bottle of ice-cold Soave.

"You seem so much at ease in Venice," Rita said. "How long have you been here?"

"Almost two years. I came because of

the light. It's always changing here and always beautiful. There's no better place for a painter like me."

"Has your work been shown anywhere?"

"So far, just a couple of little galleries in SoHo. But I have another source of income." He grinned and waved his hand at the table set prettily with a candle, pink carnations in a glass vase, and gleaming linen and cutlery. "I wouldn't call this exactly starving in a garret—being out with a beautiful woman, eating *anguille alla veneziana*."

After they ate and were sipping wine, Frank suddenly leaned forward and placed his hand on Rita's jaw. With the other hand, he pushed her hair back from her face.

She held quite still as he studied her in the flickering light of the candle. Then his hand dropped to the soft lines of her throat and folded itself gently around her neck's smooth column.

The world outside seemed to drop away around her. Rita was aware only of Frank's beguiling dark eyes, lambent in the candle's golden flame, and the vibrant warmth of his hand on her skin.

The clatter of a dropped serving tray broke Rita's dreamy mood, and she pulled away.

"Tell me about yourself," Frank said softly.

"What's there to know?" Rita said shrugging her shoulders. Before long, however, with the effect of the wine and Frank's curiosity she found herself recounting her whole life story, including her 3-year long marriage to Neil, a charming art dealer and eternal adolescent. Rita had finally divorced Neil, swearing she would never again fall in love with another adorable hedonistic man. She went into the antique business, started making good money, and felt very proud and fortunate as a result.

Frank looked at her dreamily. "And now you are in Venice, and you'll decide to stay awhile and have some fun," he murmured.

Rita laughed. "I don't think so. I'm leaving in a week, when I've finished my business here."

He reached forward and took her hands between his strong brown ones.

Rita looked down at the reddish-yellow stain on the blunt end of his right index finger and the purple smudge on the knuckle, where the turpentine hadn't reached. There was something endearing to her in these stains.

*Endearing!* she thought with alarm. Was she going to *keep* being attracted to boyishly charming men—first Neil and now this charismatic painter?

She pulled her hand away.

Frank looked up at the black, starry sky. "Let's see. The disappointed-in-love divorcee who vows never to love again, starts her own business, becomes fantastically successful, and..."

"Lives happily ever after."

Frank grinned at her.

Then, passing his thumb lightly over her fingers, he said. "You know, I've learned a lot living in Italy. Somehow the Italians seem to be able to have it all. They enjoy life—artistic beauty, good food and wine, companionship—at the same time that they get things done. Everything they consider important does get done—sooner or later."

Rita withdrew her hand. "I'm afraid I like things to work *now*, not later," she said with a chuckle. "And speaking of *now*, I'd better get my bags from the Hotel Belloni and transfer them to the Pensione Morosini before it's too late."

"OK," Frank said. "After that, let's come back to this neighborhood. I know a good little disco not far from here."

The transfer of the luggage was accomplished in no time. Rita registered at the



the pensione and was given a couple of keys, one for her room and one for the front door. She then changed into an evening dress and let Frank take her back to Castelano, to the disco club.

Once there, Frank drew her out to the dance floor, and she floated into his arms, electrified by the closeness of his body.

Hours later, long after midnight, as they were returning to the pensione, Rita sighed deeply. It had been a magical evening, and she realized she hadn't enjoyed herself so much in ages. "I had a marvelous time, Frank. Thank you."

"I'm glad," he said with simple sincerity. However, when they reached the pensione, they were in for a surprise. The front door key Rita had been given by the room clerk turned out to be the wrong one, and after a few minutes of trying to open the door with it, or getting someone to open it for them, they had to give up.

"Well, it looks like you're going to have to come to my house," Frank commented.

"Your house?" Rita said weakly.

"Yes, on Burano, remember? I'll phone for a water-taxi, or maybe a gondola. You haven't been in a gondola yet, have you? You're really going to enjoy it," Frank said with a teasing leer. "Let's go. We'll have to walk a bit to get to a phone."

Then, miraculously it seemed, even before Frank made his phone call, a long, black shape cut the moonlit waters of the canal.

Frank hailed the gondola and settled Rita on the cushioned bench spanning the narrow boat. The gondolier, his striped jersey bright against the darkness, stood in the poop behind them and poled the raft along.

They glided in eerie silence down a dark alley of water between houses that looked as if they had been abandoned after unspeakable crimes had been committed

in them.

As they went along, Frank pointed out the lovely palaces and churches that rose up from the waters in a stunning variety of periods and styles. While he talked, Rita thought dreamily, sleepily. I'm not really going to a house on a strange island to stay with a man I've just met. This isn't really happening to me, Rita Stewart, part owner of an antique shop on Madison Avenue. She pinched herself, but this was no dream.

Frank's house was a peacock-blue stucco bungalow, jewel-bright with fresh white trim around the windows. He glanced at Rita as he pulled a key out of his pocket. "A thousand lire for your thoughts."

"I don't think I ought to be here," Rita said morosely.

"I have a spare room, *cara*. Don't worry," Frank said with a knowing grin, and he ushered her into the house.

Later Rita sank into the billowy whiteness of the guest room bed with the voluptuous delight of a cherub riding a cloud across the painted ceiling of a sixteenth-century palazzo. Her lips curved upward in a smile. It had been a wonderful day. Images of the miragelike beauty of Venice passed through her mind.

She thought of Frank. The good time they had at the restaurant and the disco, the excitement that broke like a storm inside her at his touch.

Drifting off to sleep, still smiling, Rita acknowledged to herself that she hadn't felt so relaxed in years.

Rita awakened the next morning to the delicious aroma of coffee brewing. Half-opening her eyes, she saw Frank sitting on the bed.

She opened her eyes wide, glanced at the breakfast tray brimming with eggs, bacon and croissants that Frank was setting on the bed, and sank back onto the

pillow. "How heavenly! I was hoping for something like this."

"You'd better sit up and eat it, while it's hot."

Frank reached for the glass of orange juice he had put on the table and clicked glasses with her. They drank together.

"What made *you* become a painter, Frank?" Rita asked while sipping her coffee.

He raised his dark brows and thought a moment. "Looking back, it all seems inevitable, somehow. As a kid, I was always drawing and painting. Painting seemed not so much an act of will as a need coming from some deep inner hunger that was always there. And yet, because my father was a big-time corporation lawyer and wanted me to follow in his footsteps, I quit art for a while to study law."

"But you went back to art," Rita observed. "Did you find out you didn't like law, after all?"

"Partly that, but mostly I realized I didn't want the social life that went with corporation law. My parents went out almost every night. They never talked of *friends* but of *social obligations*, of *having* to go out or *having* to entertain. So I quit law school after the first year, went back to painting, and have been happy ever since."

Later, they sat across from each other at the kitchen table and emptied another pot of coffee, all the while exchanging experiences, matching impressions, learning about each other. At last Rita said, reluctantly, "Frank, this is so much fun, just talking, but I really must get back to Venice. I want to go to the contessa's shop today. But first I'll have to go home and change."

When they reached the Pensione Morosini, Rita went with Frank to use the telephone in the lobby.

"No answer," she said, putting the

phone down.

"Try again in a little while," Frank advised her cheerfully. "The contessa probably stepped out for a cappuccino."

"And left the shop untended?" Rita said dubiously. "Or does she have an assistant?"

Frank laughed. "Oh, no, the contessa wants all the fun of working in the shop for herself."

"Fun? I thought people went into business for money. And surely the contessa could use some of that, judging from the bareness of the palazzo."

Whatever answer Frank might have given was lost as a sixtyish woman with a long aristocratic face and white hair cut short approached them.

"Miss Stewart?" she asked in British-accented English. "I'm Maria Morosini."

Rita started to introduce Frank, but Miss Maria shook her head and smiled. "Frank and I are old friends—through the contessa," she explained.

The older woman waved toward a vase of tall blue irises. "I must apologize for the absence of fresh flowers in your room when you arrived yesterday. But the flower market had a very poor selection; and one must keep up one's standards, don't you agree?"

Rita nodded politely, but she wondered just how much it cost to keep fresh flowers in all the rooms.

"But today," Miss Maria continued with a satisfied smile, "you'll find some lovely irises in your room."

"Thank you. I'm sure I'll enjoy them," Rita said politely. "I'm afraid, though; that I was given the wrong key yesterday. I was unable to get in last night. I'm afraid no one was there to answer the bell, either."

Miss Maria's hand flew to a lace ruffle at her throat. "Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry! We'll remedy the matter of the key immediately, and I'll have a long talk with

Mario."

When her landlady had given her the key, Rita and Frank went to her room and looked around. The furniture was heavy and dark and massive, very old and very good.

But surprisingly, the cabinets and tables in which the large room abounded were empty of the ornamentation one usually found in rooms like this. The exception was a Faenza vase that stood on an elaborately carved chest of dark Indonesian wood. And the vase, Rita saw immediately, was a beauty. But vases of this kind always came in pairs. Where was the other one?

Miss Maria swept into the room then, followed by a woman not quite as old or as angular.

"I wanted you to meet my sister, Luisa," Miss Maria told Rita, accomplishing the introductions. "Luisa is in charge of the kitchen," Miss Maria added with pride.

Frank chuckled. "The best kitchen in Venice without exception."

A blush colored Miss Luisa's oval face and she lowered her dark eyes at the praise.

When the two sisters had left, Rita phoned Contessa Rusconi again.

The contessa answered sounding breathless. "My dear, I'm closing the shop early, so I'm afraid you can't see it today. I'm going to a party tonight, and I have absolute scads of things to do to get ready." As if struck by a happy thought, the contessa continued, "Why don't you come to the party, Miss Stewart? It's being given by an old friend of mind, Luigi Capiello. I'll ask Frank to escort you — Frank knows Luigi. Does he happen to be with you?"

Her head, whirling, Rita handed Frank the phone and within minutes plans for the party were settled.

Actually, the party might be fun. Rita

was startled by the thought—having fun had not been one of her priorities for a long time.

As they started to leave the salon, a silver-haired gentleman in his early sixties, wearing a velvet smoking jacket, entered and greeted Frank, who introduced him to Rita as one of her fellow guests.

"Then the pensione is a paying proposition," Rita remarked as they walked out into the foyer. "I mean, Miss Maria and Miss Luisa must have enough paying guests to make it worthwhile."

"I wouldn't jump to that conclusion," Frank cautioned. "The man we just met and a few others are old friends of the Morosinis. They don't pay rent, and I believe they contribute only a nominal sum for their food."

They had reached the front door. Rita stared at Frank, amazed at the picture he had just given her of total improvidence.

"That must cost the Morosini sisters an awful lot of money."

"Yes, but they can't throw their old friends out, can they?"

"I suppose not, but they might cut down a little. I mean, the pensione *could* get along without fresh flowers every day."

Now it was Frank's turn to look shocked. "I don't think Miss Maria and Miss Luisa could live without something beautiful to look at."

After Frank had left with a warm smile for her and a "See you at eight," Rita went up the short flight of stairs to her room. She glanced at the blue tower of irises on her bureau and frowned. How could one spend more than one earned and call it happiness? It was more like madness.

But she quickly put the thought out of her head. So many wonderful things were happening to her today—not the least of

which was being with Frank Giordano.

Count Capiello's party turned out to be what Rita considered an incredible extravaganza, if one took into account what Frank had told her about the count's financial situation. Lavish spreads of expensive food, vintage champagne, brilliantly lit rooms, servants everywhere—in short the type of party a millionaire would be expected to throw, but certainly not an impoverished count.

"Why do these charming, beautiful old people live beyond their means?" Rita asked Frank when they left the party. "Everywhere I've been, I've seen the same thing—bare walls, frayed carpets, repairs crying to be done—and extravagance. Why? It doesn't make sense."

"It gives them happiness," Frank said simply.

"They pay a high price for it," Rita replied.

Frank took Rita back to the pensione. The moon had cast a patina of silver over the dried-up grass and weeds of the garden, turning that wasteland into an enchanted garden. The tall, dark green cypress laid a long black finger across the silver lawn. Stepping into its shadow, Frank stopped and drew Rita into his arms.

Looking up into his glittering dark eyes, she felt both a sensual yearning and a tremor of apprehension. She couldn't deny her strong attraction to Frank, but she knew, too, that she mustn't become too deeply involved with him. There could be no future for her with Frank Giordano...

As if reading her thoughts, Frank murmured, "Oh, Rita. Don't you ever just live for the moment?"

"Live for the moment? No. I've never done that. I'm always thinking of consequences."

"Magic moments have only the most

beautiful consequences," he assured her softly.

When his lips touched hers, it seemed utterly natural, an act as inevitable as the rising of the sun.

Instinctively, she pressed closer to him. The heat of his body enflamed her senses, bringing to life demands that had lain dormant too long. His arms became a gentle vise circling her waist, while her hand went to the back of his head, to stroke his glossy jet-black hair and provoke more kisses.

"Stay in Venice," Frank coaxed as he pressed his lips caressingly over her face and throat. "At least for a little while longer. I want to get to know you. I want you to know me. Will you stay?"

Rita hesitated. She was tempted. She loved the feeling he gave her of being marvelously alive in all her senses and perceptions.

"I could," she temporized. "I'm my own boss, since I'm a partner in the business."

"Then say you'll stay. I'll give you Italian lessons," he promised, joking.

Rita laughed. "Maybe I need them. I've forgotten how to say good night in Italian, so I'll just say *addio* now."

"Now that you're staying in Venice, *cara*," Frank said softly. "I'll teach you how to say *arrivederci*."

Promptly at ten the next morning, as she had arranged with the contessa at Count Capiello's party, Rita pushed open the door of the contessa's shop on the street behind the palazzo. She stepped inside and walked around, then stopped short, stunned by the haphazard arrangement of merchandise.

Rita shuddered. The contessa's shop had a certain helter-skelter charm, but from a merchandising standpoint it resembled a white-elephant sale.

The contessa was seated at a desk in the

ear of the store. Catching sight of Rita, he waved and called out, "I'll be right here." She got up and made her way to Rita through the maze of furniture and wicker-a-brac. "Well, is there anything in particular that you're interested in?"

"I have a shopping list headed by a medieval bronze. One of my customers collects nothing but, and our mutual acquaintance in Paris told me you might have something."

"Indeed, I have just the piece for you. A beautiful little figure mounted on a lion. It's actually a candlestick. Fifteenth century," she added, watching Rita's reaction.

"Marvelous! My client will be ecstatic. May I see it?"

"Yes, of course." The contessa's eyes moved her shop. "I know just where it is. If you'll follow me."

With Rita in tow, the contessa threaded her way among the tables, chests, cabinets, and objects d'art, searching for the bronze candlestick. "I have a picture in my mind of exactly where I put it," she said. "I just can't find it."

"Perhaps if your shop were arranged differently?" Rita suggested tentatively. "If the merchandise were grouped systematically and there were aisles? Perhaps the less valuable articles could be placed in front of the shop, and the pieces that would interest only the connoisseur be kept in the rear. I could even help you, if you'd like."

The contessa's periwinkle-blue eyes sharpened with interest. "Those certainly seem to be good ideas...Ah, here it is." She handed Rita a foot-high figure in bronze of a youth astride a lion.

Knowing the contessa's eyes were on her, Rita kept a straight face. It wouldn't be professional to let her disappointment show—even less, her amusement.

"I'm afraid," she said gently, handing the bronze candlestick back to the

contessa, "that this piece is nineteenth, not fifteenth, century. The Oriental quality of the lion's face is never found in medieval bronzes."

Murmuring meaningless phrases, "But of course," and "I'm so sorry," and "I hope you're not too disappointed," the contessa turned away to put the bronze candlestick back. But Rita had already seen the look of respect in the bright-blue eyes, and this time she allowed herself a broad smile. She had passed the contessa's test. She could be sure now of being shown only the choice pieces, the authentic antiques.

The door opened and was banged shut. "Take care of your customer," Rita whispered. "I have plenty of time. I'll just browse for a while."

Rita walked through the shop, stopping suddenly in front of a mahogany table. The duplicate of the Faenza vase in the Pensione Morosini stood on top of it. It was clear that Miss Maria and Miss Luisa were keeping themselves afloat by selling the family heirlooms.

Saddened by yet another example of the Morosinis' impoverishment, Rita found herself searching for other pieces she might recognize. A shiver passed through her as she saw on the contessa's business desk at the rear of the store a mantel clock she had highly admired at the Palazzo Capiello. The count must have given it to the contessa to sell for him after last night's party.

When the door closed on the customer, the contessa returned to Rita. "I'm sorry for the interruption, but that's the way it is in a shop." She glanced toward Rita's attache case. "Was there something else you had on your shopping list that I can help you with?"

"I'm sure there is," Rita laughed. "It's a long list." Her voice dropped. "But I think you have another customer."

Frank had just entered with an older

man. Rita's heart skipped a beat.

His eyes, searching the store, had found her, too, and Rita could see in their depths the same acknowledgement of the electricity between them that she had shown in her sea-green eyes.

The stocky, well-dressed man accompanying him was a Richard Graham from Minneapolis whom Frank had met at a local art gallery. Graham told the contessa that he was interested in an antique ornamental clock and that Frank had recommended her shop. Rita silently rooted for the Capiello clock and was overjoyed when Richard Graham said he preferred it to the others shown to him by the contessa.

While the contessa wrapped up the sale, Frank drew Rita aside. "I missed you."

"Since last night?"

"Always. Missing isn't only a factor of time."

"Not to change the subject, but I think it's very kind of you to help the contessa get customers."

Frank shrugged off her praise. "It's no big deal. I get around a lot; I talk to people in Venice. The contessa has some nice things in the shop. Why shouldn't I recommend her?"

By the time the contessa was done with her customer, it was time for lunch. Regretfully, Rita rejected an invitation to lunch from Frank, feeling obligated to do some of the work she had come to Venice to do. She spent the afternoon visiting antique shops, had dinner at the pensione and retired to bed early, with an Italian book from the pensione's library.

Much later, she was awakened by a patter against the window. She sprang out of bed, reached for a robe, and ran to the French window, which she threw open. She stepped out onto the balcony. In the dim light of an old-fashioned lamppost, she could just discern the outline of Frank

Giordano's tall, broad-shouldered body. He was standing on the gravel path that bisected the pensione's desiccated garden.

"Come down," he coaxed.

"No! Go away. Have you any idea what time it is?"

"Time to be with you. I won't leave until you come down. I want to show you the sunrise."

Rita laughed, a low, musical trill into the night. "You're mad. I'm going back to bed. Good night!"

As she crossed the hardwood floor between the window and her bed, she heard Frank's voice softly raised in the smooth-flowing strains of a tender love song. She laughed again, jumped into bed, pulled the comforter up over her head, and tried to go back to sleep.

But she was more awake than ever vibrant with energy, all her senses sharp and alive. It touched and amused her, and even made her feel a little shy that Frank would think of such a romantic approach.

Then, guilt-stricken, Rita remembered the other guests in the pensione. Was Frank's serenade waking them all up?

She sprang out of bed and went to the window again. "Please stop, Frank. You'll wake up the whole house."

"Not till you come with me to see the sunrise, *signorina*."

Rita smiled in the darkness. Her green eyes sparkled with delight at Frank's surprise visit.

"You win," she called down softly to him. "Just give me a minute to dress."

When she came down to him, her tattered locks moving lightly in the morning breeze, Frank looked at her a moment with awed admiration. "You look like Aurora, goddess of the dawn."

"I think you're absolutely mad, you know."

"Mad with love for you, crazy about you," Frank replied huskily. He took her face between his palms and looked deep

to her eyes.

His mouth took swift, sure possession of hers. Rita quivered and her breathing grew ragged as she felt his moist, open lips press fiercely against her full, lush ones.

"We should go," he murmured in a low voice. "A Venetian sunrise is too beautiful to miss." Taking her hand, he led her out into the street.

As they walked through the silent streets under a dark sky just beginning to lighten, it seemed to Rita that Frank was looking in with relish all the signs of the most-morning: the mist rising off a small canal, the vague forms of the buildings in the half-light, the twinkling of cat's legs as it ran across a street in front of them.

Then, with surprise, she realized that she now shared, to some extent, his responsiveness to the visual world. For the first time in her life, thanks to Frank, she was taking the time to look at objects without any regard to their possible usefulness to her.

With a happy sigh, she placed her hand over his.

"I think I've just discovered that the world is a beautiful place."

"That it is, *cara mia*," Frank said seriously. "That it is."

They climbed up to a hilltop piazza where they could watch the sun come up over Venice. The view from up there was spectacular. One could see all of the city, far out into the Adriatic, and as far away as the Alps.

When the sun's golden wheel rolled up over the horizon, they gasped in unison. "Magnificent, isn't it?" Frank said. "You can actually sense the sun's force. It's almost violent, too much. Look how its rays are gilding the rooftops and the edges now. They're turning Venice into a city of gold."

Suddenly, he turned away from the view and looked down at her, passing his

hand lovingly over her reddish-gold ringlets. "You've been touched by the sunrise, too, Rita. It's turned your hair to copper and made your eyes green and gold like the first young leaves on a sun-struck tree."

With infinite slowness, he drew her into his arms. For a long moment, Rita felt as if she were floating, held up by the solidity of his arms.

Her lips dallied with Frank's. She pressed gently little kisses against his lips, then blew her warm breath into his mouth.

His breathing uneven, and with a deep, muttered exclamation of longing, Frank pulled her roughly, urgently to him. As she closed her eyes, drugged by the rapture of his greedy kisses, all the colors of the sunrise flamed across her mind.

"Come to my studio," he murmured, playing the corners of her mouth with teasing kisses. "Let me paint you as I see you now, as Aurora, goddess of my dawn."

Rita was touched by the invitation and terribly flattered to be the subject of a painting. She realized, too, in a searing moment of insight, that the painting would bring her to the very center of Frank's life, that it would enhance their intimacy.

Her breath began to come fast. It was dangerous to enter another person's life, to let him into yours. Did she have the courage? Rita wondered. Could she risk being hurt again?

Suddenly, she was tired of figuring all the angles. A mood of reckless, glorious abandon took hold. She *wanted* the glory of being painted by Frank. Why shouldn't she seize this chance of joy?

"Yes, of course, I'll come," she said softly.

They went to Burano, where Rita dressed in a gauze draped sarong and posed for Frank.



All his energy seemed to be *transformed* into a vital force that he poured into his painting. His brush strokes were bold and unerring. His movements, brush in hand, back and forth between Rita and his canvas, were dynamically forceful; his eyes were darker and sharper than Rita had ever seen them.

Watching him, she felt shivers of excitement run up and down her spine. He was a firebrand, rekindling the partially banked embers of her desire.

When he finally said, "Why don't you take a break, Rita," she slid off the model's stool and stretched, raising her arms over her head to ease her tense muscles.

"My God, but you're beautiful!"

His amorous look fed Rita's desire till she felt weak with longing for him.

"You're tired. I'm keeping you too long."

"No, it's all right," she protested.

"Let me ease those muscles for you," he offered.

Holding her gently but firmly with one hand, Frank kneaded the muscles of her back with the other. Rita stood, eyes closed, head down, hypnotized by his touch, tingling under his fingertips.

"Feeling better?" he asked solicitously.

"Oh, yes," she said, with a small moan of pleasure.

Pulling her toward him, he fused his body with hers, and the fiery thrill of the kisses he rained on her neck and shoulders ran the length of her soft, pliant form.

"I'll never let you go, *cara mia*. I want you, I need you, too much," Frank murmured as he buried his face in her thick, curly hair.

Then his mouth sought hers, and it seemed to Rita that all of life and the world lay in Frank's hands and the mouth that was warming hers.

"Oh, Rita," Frank breathed. "My love, my life, my goddess of the dawn."

He carried her to the bedroom where she had slept the night she was in his house, to the bed she thought of as almost her own. As he laid her gently down on it, the gauze drape fell away from her. Frank gazed reverently down at her love-flushed body; then, bending over her, he scattered a shower of snowflake-soft kisses over her neck and shoulders.

"Undress me, *cara mia*," he said huskily, and garment by garment she removed his clothes. Finally, he stood naked before her, his skin like burnished copper in the sunlight that flowed into the room.

"You're beautiful!" Rita sang out in a paean of joy. Her arms invited him back to the bed.

He whispered her name in kisses that touched her breasts lightly, tantalizingly, and Rita moaned with longing. The sensations he was creating were nearly too piercing to bear.

Finally he swept her beneath him in one fluid motion. Rita twined her golden legs around his tanned hips in a frenzy of passion and called his name again and again. He was the man she loved, the only other human being on this rocket shooting both of them out beyond the world's boundary.

When it was over and he collapsed, gasping, his face wet against her belly, she stroked his hair. "It was wonderful, darling," she whispered.

"We made a world of our own," Frank said with awe. "It's ours and always will be ours alone."

Later, Rita twined her fingers through the wiry brown hair of Frank's chest and gave it a playful little tweak. "You didn't finish your painting," she said softly.

"All it needs is a little more work. I'll finish it tomorrow."

"What are you going to call it?" she asked.

"How about 'Rita at Sunrise'?"

"I like it," Rita said. She wound her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest. "I can't wait to see it."

"*Domani*, tomorrow, *cara mia*," Frank said softly. "The first of all our tomorrows together."

Rita tensed in his arms. "I can't stay in Venice forever, Frank. I do have a business to take care of, you know."

Frank nibbled gently at her ear. "Don't make problems, *cara mia*; we'll find a way." Then his eyes deep wells of tenderness, he said seriously. "I mean it, *cara mia*, I love you. I want you with me. Always. Venice, Rome, New York...the place doesn't matter, so long as we're together. Tell me you feel the same way, too."

A thrill of pleasure shot through her at his words. He loved her! As amazing as it sounded...that in just a few days they had fallen in love—it was nonetheless true. And all at once she realized with a burst of joy that she loved him, too.

Dropping her voice, she said gravely, most shyly, "I love you, Frank."

He folded her in his arms and kissed her a long, passionate explosion of love. Then, together, they soared into the blissful cosmos that belong exclusively to a man and a woman who love each other.

As she lay in Frank's arms afterward, Rita luxuriated in happiness. Never, she thought, had she felt so serene, so loving, so loved, so much at peace with herself.

And what if, in her headlong rush toward happiness, she hadn't given the matter a thought? As happy as she was, what could possibly go wrong in the bright new world her life had just come?

When they woke up, the room was bright with sunshine.

"We have to get up," Rita said lazily. Frank encircled her waist with both

arms. "Why? Give me one good reason."

"Work!" she said dramatically. "You've got to do more work on your painting, and I want to go to the contessa's shop again. She promised to take care of me without interruption this time. Anyway, I'm dying to see the painting."

Frank smiled broadly and reached his hand out to her. "Come on," he said. "We'll look at it together."

With Frank behind her, Rita walked into the room slowly, not taking her eyes from the canvas. Even partially finished, the painting was magnificent. There was a directness about the picture, an *expression* of emotion rather than an *illustration* of it, that was breathtaking. And the emotion was pure joy.

Rita smiled a little at her "portrait." The picture was a testament of Frank's love for her. Studying the painting more objectively, she found it amazing that so much talent should go unrecognized.

"Do you like it?" Frank asked, his dark eyes searching her light-green ones intently.

"Oh, Frank, it's wonderful," she breathed. "You have a tremendous talent. I feel overwhelmed. It should be exhibited, Frank. It really should. You owe it to yourself and...well...although this may sound a little pretentious, the world of art."

Frank shrugged. "I'll exhibit some day. When I'm ready. But the business end of art is so distasteful to me. I hate all that chitchat that goes on at gallery openings. It's affected and pompous and basically ignorant."

He picked up his brushes and stationed himself in front of the canvas. "Now, if you'll excuse me, Ms. Rembrandt, I'll just finish off this little masterpiece before lunch."

As she dressed for the day, Rita continued to think about the remarkable

painting. Frank simply had to be convinced to let the world see his art. She decided that she would actively encourage him in that direction. She was a good businesswoman, had a lot of contacts in the art world, even right here in Venice, and, after all, what were lovers for except to help each other overcome obstacles like that? Anyway she was rather worried about Frank's financial situation. He had indicated that he was in no dire need of money, but what was the harm of earning some additional money from the sale of his own much-acclaimed paintings?

Later in the afternoon, Frank accompanied Rita to the contessa's shop. The contessa was delighted to see them and proceeded to help Rita select a number of pieces for her Madison Avenue shop. Rita, however, was again totally dismayed by the disarray of the contessa's shop.

When the arrangements for the purchase of these items and their shipping had been made, Rita asked the contessa tentatively, "Have you given any more thought to having me demonstrate how your shop might be rearranged?" "It might result in more sales, if customers could readily view all the fine merchandise you have here."

The contessa's blue eyes became wary. "We could try it," she said politely, promising nothing. "The area in the rear of the store is relatively free of furniture, if you'd like to do some rearranging there."

Out of the corner of her eye, Rita caught a glimpse of Frank's expression. He was frowning and shaking his head at her.

She hesitated. The contessa's response could hardly be called enthusiastic, and Frank was openly disapproving. Still, what she had in mind couldn't help but be an improvement. The contessa might not be as impoverished as Rita had originally thought, but she was in business to make a profit, and a more systematic arrange-

ment *would* help sales.

So, avoiding his eyes, she said. "Would you help me move a few pieces of furniture, Frank? I just want to give the contessa an example of what I have in mind."

"Of course," he answered in a neutral tone.

While the contessa stood off to one side, anxiously watching, Rita and Frank set up a model of how the shop would look if it were rearranged. When they had finished, Rita stepped back and regarded the orderly division of merchandise with pride.

She glanced at the contessa, expecting to see a pleased expression on the elderly woman's face. Instead, the Contessa Rusconi looked worried, as if fearful that someone might force her to have her shop that way.

And Frank's face was set in stern lines.

The phone rang just then, startling the three of them. But the contessa brightened immediately. "Will you excuse me?" she called out gaily over her shoulder, as she hurried to her desk.

"It's no good, Rita," Frank warned. "The contessa's too courteous to tell you, but she doesn't like it. If the shop were fixed the way you want it, it would be more efficient, but it wouldn't be the contessa's style. She just wouldn't have any fun running it."

"Fun! I thought the contessa wanted to make money."

"I have an idea she would be content with making a little less in a shop she was comfortable with, rather than a lot in some place altogether alien to her personality."

"So what you would suggest when one sees a mess like this is a *far niente*, a doing nothing, philosophy?"

"Isn't it better to do nothing than to interfere and take the fun out of the contessa's business?" Frank's dark eyes held Rita's in a long, serious look.

Rita felt depressed and confused. *Fun!* To her mind, that wasn't relevant to doing business. She was out of her league here, she thought; Italy was the wrong ballpark for her.

Was Frank wrong for her, too? Never in a million years could she subscribe to that "let well enough alone" attitude of his. And he was just as opposed to her activist philosophy. Could they ever find a common meeting ground?

If they didn't find one soon, Rita reflected sadly, the wise thing would be to break off now, while they still could. *If* they could. For the truth was that he had become part of her, and she of him.

Later Rita felt her mood lightening as they water-taxed to Burano. When they entered the peacock-blue house, Frank drew Rita into his arms. "I can't stay angry with you, darling. I know you intended the best for the contessa. It's just..." He stopped.

"I know," Rita answered with a little laugh. "We have entirely opposite points of view, and neither of us can understand why the other feels as he does."

Rita felt a renewed urge to explain herself to the man she loved.

"I think I can see now why my merchandising techniques wouldn't work for the contessa. For one thing, my mind has a tendency to go in a straight line from point to point like a highway; hers meanders like a little country lane."

"That's a good way to put it."

"But looking back, I don't think I was always the way I am now—so hung up on goals and efficiency."

"Not as a baby, I would hope," Frank murmured.

"I think it all started with Neil. One of us had to take responsibility and since he was incapable of it, I did."

"Was he really incapable of responsibility?" Frank asked gently, "or did the interaction between the two of you bring

about that result?"

"I see what you're getting at. It takes two to tango, doesn't it?" Rita sighed. "I guess we made a mess of that marriage."

Frank planted a kiss on her forehead. "You had fun, too, didn't you? There were good times as well as bad."

"We had some wonderful times. Neil was a great companion. I guess his problem was not that he liked pleasure, but that he liked it too much."

"A little hedonism is a good thing. It lightens the burden of living. Too much results in childishness, I suppose."

"It's done me a lot of good to talk to you, Frank," Rita said softly. "You helped me straighten out my own thinking."

Frank pulled her to him and kissed her face through the golden-red curtain of heavy hair. "That's what lovers are for, to help each other."

Rita flung her arms around Frank's neck and silently brought his mouth to hers.

"*Cara*," Frank said when they parted for a breath, "I hate to part from you, but I have to go to Rome all day tomorrow on business."

"Business? What business?" Rita asked perplexed.

"Business," he said enigmatically. "Will you do me a favor, *cara*? Will you be here tomorrow when I get back from Rome. I'll give you my key. I want to walk in the front door and see you here, your hair flaming for me, your green eyes clear and sparkling as the Adriatic on a sunny day. Will you do that for me, Rita?"

"Yes," she breathed and said it over and over—yes to his turbulent kisses, yes to his loving hands, yes to their joyful, sky-vaulting union.

It wasn't until she was drifting off to sleep that night that Rita gave some thought to Frank's so-called business in Rome. What sort of business could Frank

possibly have that he wasn't willing to talk to her about, she wondered, puzzled. A fleeting sense of anxiety crossed her mind, but it soon disappeared as she cradled in his arms and fell blissfully asleep.

Next morning, after Frank left for Rome, Rita went into Venice and took care of some business of her own. She also found time to stop in at the pensione and call Ugo Orseolo, gallery owner and art critic friend of hers, who immediately expressed an interest in seeing Frank's work. Rita was excited and apprehensive at the same time. How was Frank going to react to her meddling in his private affairs? Yet how was Frank to overcome this reluctance of his to exhibit his work unless she pushed him a tiny bit?

While Rita was talking to Ugo on the pensione's phone, she overheard Miss Maria and Miss Luisa talking in the next room.

"I don't know what we're going to do," Miss Luisa said sadly. "We can't afford to keep them any longer."

"We can't put them out on the street," Miss Maria responded emotionally. "They're old friends. Where would they go? What would they do?"

Miss Luisa sounded horrified. "We'd never put them out, Maria. It's just that I don't know how we're going to manage."

"We'll sell something again," Miss Maria said with conviction. "Lily says she could sell the pair of Faenza vases if they were both in the shop and that will keep us afloat for a while."

Rita sighed, vicariously feeling the agony of the two sisters. She hoped at least that the contessa could fetch a good price for the Faenza vases, thus helping the sisters to carry on in their accustomed graceful style a while longer.

Later that evening, Rita returned to Burano to wait for Frank. When she heard his key in the lock, she flew to the door and was instantly blanketed in a

huge bouquet of roses.

"Frank! I've never seen so many roses. And they're beautiful, utterly beautiful." She buried her face in the velvety soft, perfumed petals.

The roses fell to the floor as he seized her and pulled her to him, crushing her lips in a hungry kiss that Rita matched with her own fierce ardor.

"Let's go out and celebrate being together again. It's been a long day without you, Rita," he murmured, breathing deeply of her perfumed hair.

"Where shall we go?"

"I feel lucky tonight. Lucky because I have you. How about the casino?"

"Oh, yes," Rita exclaimed. "I want to drink champagne and meet a suave jewel thief."

"The first is easy. But I don't know about the second. Casinos frown on jewel thieves."

Rita tucked her arm into Frank's. "Then I'll settle for a famous painter."

Frank looked around the empty room. "Who?"

"You!"

"You've got the wrong guy, but that's all right."

"Don't you want to be famous, Frank?"

Frank laughed and shook his head. "That's the last thing in the world I want."

Rita's earlier anxiety resurfaced instantly. She decided to have a talk with Frank right there and then.

"Darling," she started hesitantly. "I have a good friend who owns an art gallery here in Venice. I talked to him about your work, and he very much wants to see it."

Frank's face became clouded over with tension.

"Rita, I told you already. I do not want to have my art exhibited and sold," he said abruptly.

"You act as though *earning* money is

dirty, like *stealing* it! There's such a thing as being overly idealistic, you know."

"Am I starving?" He swung his arm around the large, well-equipped studio. "Am I living in squalor?"

Rita glanced around the studio. Her glance traveled beyond, into the hall, implicitly taking in the whole house.

"I know you're wondering how I pay for all this. I have a trust fund. I don't have to hustle. I can take time to develop my work. Having an independent income gives me the freedom to paint for painting's sake."

"It can make you afraid, too. Afraid to go out in the marketplace and be judged."

"Cowardice isn't my problem," Frank said shortly. "I would rather you minded your own business. Stop trying to control other people's lives. First you tried to change the contessa, now it's my turn."

"I love you. I am trying to help you, because I am so proud of you, of your artistic talent," Rita said, shaken.

Frank must have heard the hurt in her voice. He came toward her and took her in his arms.

"I'm sorry, *cara mia*. Perhaps you are right. Perhaps it's time for me to establish myself as an artist in the marketplace. You just have to give me some time to get used to the idea. Actually I am gratified that you think so much of my art and that your friend is interested in seeing it. Anyway, now I don't have to face it all by myself, do I? We're no longer alone and separate, are we, *cara mia*?"

Rita pressed his strong, muscular hand. "No, my darling. We're two—against the world, if need be."

All thought of going to the casino faded away from both their minds, as his kisses fell like stars on her moon-bright face.

"I want to kiss you and make love to you all the time," he murmured. "But I

also love you beyond that, beyond the kissing and the making love."

Her whole being seemed to flow into his hands as they grasped her slim sides and curved around her hips.

"Let me love you the way I want to," he whispered. While Rita watched, mystified, he quickly undressed and then anchored a quilt over the bedside rug, making a high tent of it.

There, in the dark, vaulted cave, he made fierce, rawly sensuous love to her. Rita felt neon-lit, glorious with color, warmth, and light. She was hanging on for dear life, suspended in the most glorious experience of all, afraid to breathe for fear it would stop. Then the fire inside her reached a towering peak. A white-hot rapture flowed through her, through him, fusing them in the final gasping, incredibly joyous ecstasy.

When Rita woke up again, it was full daylight. Another wonderful day with Frank, she thought, smiling blissfully, and she wrapped her arms around him as if to keep the happy thought close.

Was it only because she was in love or was it actually true, Rita wondered, that happiness seemed to shine on the Pensione Morosini two mornings later like the sun outside?

Miss Maria sang out a "good morning" as Rita descended the stairs for a late breakfast. Later, Miss Luisa poked her head out of the kitchen and beamed a happy smile at the few guests still in the dining room.

An extra wave of good feeling flooded Rita's heart at the blitheness of the Morosini sisters. To be so relaxed and cheerful, the sisters must have gotten a good price for their Faenza vases, she thought, silently blessing the contessa for helping her friends. At the same time, Rita's curiosity as an antique dealer came to the fore. What *had* the contessa gotten

for the vases? she wondered.

Going to the lobby after breakfast to phone Frank, she found Miss Maria arranging a beautiful bouquet of birds-of-paradise.

"I see that pretty vase is gone," Rita said.

Miss Maria nodded. "Lily...the contessa...sold it for us, together with the other one. Luisa and I hated to see them go, but money's important, too. Besides, they could have gotten broken at any time."

"Of course," Rita said, respecting Miss Maria's pride. "Did you get a good price for the pair?"

Miss Maria's patrician face glowed. "Yes, very," she named a figure and followed it with a question. "Don't you think, on the basis of your experience, that Lily did well for us, Miss Stewart?"

It took all Rita's self-control not to let her dismay show in her face. The Faenza vases had been sold for a shockingly low price, much less than their value.

How could as canny an antique dealer as the contessa have accepted such a paltry amount? Rita wondered as she dialed Frank's number. She shook her head. It just didn't make sense.

But all thought of the Faenza vases went out of her mind when she heard Frank's voice.

"Morning, darling," Rita said. "I'm up and dressed and I've had breakfast. What time were you going to come for me?"

Frank's reply was a long chuckle. "You won't believe this, but the contessa's mover, Alfredo, is on strike. The contessa called me this morning and asked me if I'd mind packing those things you bought. Do you want to come with me, to make sure I do it right?"

"On strike? Does he belong to a union?"

Frank laughed again. "Everyone in

Italy belongs to a union." He lowered his voice. "I can't wait to see you. Will you come to the contessa's with me?"

"Yes. Frank—?" But he had hung up. She'd have to wait to ask what *he* thought of the figure the Faenza vases had sold for.

"Miss Maria told me this morning how much the contessa got for those Faenza vases," Rita told him later on their way to the contessa's. "Do you think fifteen hundred dollars is a satisfactory price?"

"You're the expert," Frank answered. "What do you think?"

"The price is lower than I would have expected, and I deal in antique porcelains all the time." She shrugged. "But the market for that sort of thing may be lower here than at home."

However, she didn't believe that herself. The amount had been much too low to be explained by a difference in markets.

When they reached the Quay Rusconi, Frank placed a hand on Rita's arm. "Look!" He smiled and pointed straight ahead.

"I don't believe this," she muttered. "Alfredo carrying a picket sign outside the palazzo?"

Frank laughed outright. "There's more to come. The contessa's bringing him his lunch."

They stopped and watched the contessa take the cardboard sign out of Alfredo's hand, prop it against the wall, and hand him a Thermos and a dish covered with an embroidered linen napkin.

"Labor trouble, Italian style?" Rita said in a tone of disbelief.

"Plus noblesse oblige, friendship, caring. They've been together a long time, the contessa and Alfredo."

Catching sight of Rita and Frank then, the contessa walked toward them and seized Rita's hands in greeting. "How are you, my dear? So nice to see you both again."



She unlocked the door to the shop with a huge dungeon-type key and turned on the lights. "Your purchases and the packing materials are in a little room at the rear of the shop. I'll go with you, Frank, to show you where everything is. Rita, would you like to stay here or come with us?"

"I'm an inveterate browser, Contessa. I think I'll stay here and enjoy looking at the lovely things you have."

"As you wish."

Left alone, Rita went immediately to the area where she had set up the model for rearrangement of the shop. She felt a twinge of disappointment as she saw that everything had been put back as before. Then she acknowledged with a wry laugh at herself that the contessa had every right to arrange her shop as she wished.

The door opened and was softly shut behind her. Rita turned and saw Luigi Capiello, the count whose party she had attended on her first night in Venice.

"Signorina Stewart! What a pleasant surprise."

"I'm flattered that you remember me, Count."

Instantly, Rita noticed the brown paper package the Count was carrying under his arm. So Count Capiello needed money again and was bringing something to the contessa to sell. She wondered what it'd be this time.

Rita went back to help Frank with the packages, while the contessa came to wait on the count. While she was filling out some postal forms, she couldn't help but overhear the conversation going on up front.

"Will it fetch as much as the French clock?" the count asked eagerly. "I was very pleased with the price you got for that."

"Oh, I think so," the contessa said pleasantly.

As they went on to discuss the money

the count had received for the clock, Rita was amazed and shocked. Richard Graham had paid a whole lot more for it, that she was certain of.

"What's the matter, love?" Frank asked, watching her. "You've tensed up."

She needed time to think, Rita told herself. She had to find another explanation for the thought that had ripped through her mind like a hurricane, leaving devastation and ruin in its wake.

"I'm going to have to go home and lie down, Frank. I've suddenly got a very bad headache. I get them once in a while, and rest is the only thing that alleviates the pain."

She turned away from the expression of tender concern in Frank's face. Horrified and dazed by her suspicion, her only desire now was to get away from him.

"I'll take you back to your pensione," he said.

"No, darling, I'm fine alone," she said as she fled the shop.

Once inside her room, Rita threw herself across her bed and sobbed into the white cotton spread. Crying finally brought a degree of calm. She sat up, blew her nose vigorously, and confronted her suspicion head on that the contessa and Frank were working a scam together.

Given what she had found out about the amount of money the Morosinis received for their Faenza vases and Count Capiello for his Louis Quinze clock, no other conclusion seemed possible. The contessa sold the heirlooms of her aristocratic friends at a higher price than she told them she received and pocketed the difference after splitting with Frank, who brought her customers like Richard Graham. Rita felt disgusted almost to the point of nausea. The contessa was below contempt. As for Frank. . . .

For the first time, it occurred to Rita that Frank's story about having a trust

fund might be fictitious. Wasn't it just as logical under the circumstances to assume that he was supporting himself through a share of the contessa's take?

Still, Rita reflected, knowing Frank as she did, it just didn't seem possible that he could be, in effect, a con man.

She felt bewildered again. She had been confronted with two incompatible situations: Frank's honesty as she knew it and the seeming evidence of a scam in which he was involved. For the first time in her life, logic failed her. She was completely unable to decide where the truth lay.

Frank called a couple of hours later. "Rita, how are you feeling now, sweetheart? How's the headache? I've been worried about you."

"It's better," Rita answered tersely.

"Then how about dinner tonight?"

"No, Frank," she said quickly. "I'm sorry. It's impossible."

There was a long silence. Rita thought of hanging up, but some unknown force, maybe a childish belief in magic, kept her clutching the phone, waiting for him to say, "I'll bet I know what you're thinking, but you've got it all wrong."

Instead, he said sternly, "Rita, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I have to go now. Good-bye, Frank."

"Don't hang up," he commanded sharply. "I'm coming over. And I don't want you to leave till I get there. You've got to promise me that. Will you?"

Rita hesitated. After all they had meant to each other, it wouldn't be fair not to give Frank a chance to clear himself, she decided. If he *could* clear himself.

"I'll be here when you come," she said in a small, unhappy voice. "I promise."

Rita washed her face and bathed her tear-swollen eyes.

Although she had been waiting for it, the light rap on her door startled her. She was even more surprised by Frank's

appearance. His dark eyes had a wounded look in them. His expression, for the first time since she had known him, was uncertain and wary.

Frank confronted her immediately. "What's wrong, Rita?" he asked grimly. His eyes, narrowed to a piercing jet-black now, studied her. "The headache was an excuse, wasn't it?"

Rita steeled herself to hold steady under his scrutiny. "Yes, Frank. I had to get away."

"From *me*?" Surprise, disbelief, and shock rang in his voice.

"I heard Capiello say how much he had gotten for that precious Louis Quinze clock, and I know what she made Graham pay for it. The figures don't match. As I'm sure they don't match for those vases she sold for the Morosini sisters! The contessa is cheating on her own good friends!"

Frank was watching her, an outraged, stormy look on his face. "If you believe that of the contessa, what do you think *I've* been doing?"

Rita took a deep breath to get courage for her answer. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it, Frank?"

"I've been bringing the pigeons in. Is that what you think?" His full lips curled with bitterness. The pupils of his dark eyes were wide with pain.

"What other conclusion can I come to?" she said, looking him directly in the eye.

"Look!" he said sharply. "I'm going to hang on to my temper, no matter what. I'm reasonable enough to see how you could have jumped to the conclusion that you did. But I'm asking you to trust me...just trust me," he repeated, his voice breaking a little.

"You mean, you don't have an explanation for all this?" Rita asked, aghast.

"Not now, I don't. But Rita, trust me.

You know I'm no crook—don't you?"

She looked away from him toward the window, as if she wanted to escape the room and him and the dilemma he had put her in. Trust didn't come easily to her where men were concerned.

"I can't tell you what you want to hear, Frank. I just can't."

"I understand, *cara*," he answered, his voice low and vibrant with emotion. "Promise me just one thing, though."

"What?" she asked cautiously.

"That you won't run away, leave Venice without telling me."

She glanced at Frank, her expression puzzled. Was there an explanation, after all? Why would he want her to stay if not to see the mystery cleared up?

She didn't dare hope. But in spite of herself, her heart began to beat fast, and there was even a slight lift in her voice as she said, "I promise."

"I'll see you soon," he said. He gave her a long, steadfast look that said as clearly as words, "Keep your promise." Then he turned and left the room.

But the next time, hours later, that Maria knocked on the door with her soft, "*Telefono, signorina*," it was the contessa who was on the phone.

"Rita," she said, in a frosty, rather peremptory voice, "I'm having a little spur-of-the-moment party tomorrow night for some of my friends, and I'd like you to be here. I am going to make an announcement that I very much want you to hear."

"In that case," Rita said politely, "I'll come. Good afternoon, Contessa."

She put the phone down thoughtfully. It was obvious that Frank had told the contessa about her suspicions and that the contessa was angry with her. Too bad! Rita decided, thinking of the people the contessa had cheated. But at the same time, a lingering wisp of sadness remained in her heart. She had liked the contessa, had admired her intelligence, her spirit,

and yes, Rita thought with a grimace, her honesty.

As she wandered alone around Venice the next day, there wasn't a place she went that she hadn't seen with Frank: not a building whose beauty he hadn't pointed out to her, whose history he hadn't told her. She could feel the weight of his arm on her shoulder, the pressure of his lips on hers, the loving way he looked at her, everywhere.

She went over and over again in her mind what seemed to her to constitute the evidence for and against Frank and the contessa. It seemed as clear as day that they had cheated the contessa's friends. What other explanation could there be for the small amounts of money they had received for their heirlooms?

Only some faint glimmer of belief in her own judgment, some faith in both Frank and the contessa, like an oasis in a desert, kept her heart from drying up that afternoon. She was grateful when it was finally time to dress for the party.

Rita arrived at the contessa's on time and joined the crowd of guests. Many were people she had seen at Count Capiello's party. The count himself was there and the Morosini sisters.

The contessa came up to Rita. Her face wore a cool smile, but there was a flash of blue fire in her eyes that showed her true feelings.

"I'm glad you came, Rita. I think you will find this party particularly interesting."

As the contessa moved away to greet other guests, Miss Maria, with Luisa in tow, walked over to Rita.

"It's nice to dress up once in a while," Miss Maria said. "If only as a reminder of who you are."

"We owe it to Lily, too, after she's gone to so much trouble and expense to entertain us," Miss Luisa said loyally. "If we had known you were coming alone, we

would have asked you to come with us. But we thought Frank would escort you."

"Frank is here, then?" Rita asked numbly. Her breath started to come fast. She dreaded seeing him again.

"Oh, yes," Miss Maria said. "As I understand it, Frank was the motivating spirit behind the party or at least behind the announcement the contessa is going to make."

She saw him then, making his way to her across the crowded room. Then he was there, standing in front of her, his eyes searching hers.

"You kept your promise," he said.

"I always keep my word."

"Always, *cara*?"

Rita flushed and turned away. She knew he was referring to her promises of love made during their love-filled nights.

The clarion call of a spoon rapped against fine crystal brought the room to a sudden silence. The contessa had positioned herself at the refreshment table, where a small space had been cleared around her.

"Friends," she began. "I invited you here tonight because I have something very important to tell you." The silence deepened to an absolute absence of sound. "Throughout the years, many of you have brought your family heirlooms and objects d'art to me to sell for you. You gave me your trust." The contessa paused and looked at the people gazing affectionately at her. "I must now confess that, in a way, I let you down. I purposely and consistently told you I received less for your heirlooms than I actually did." A long drawn-out hiss of surprised dismay rippled through the salon. Rita felt sickened by this confirmation of her suspicion about the contessa and Frank.

The contessa dropped her voice to a low dramatic pitch. "However, I did not cheat you."

Now a buzz of "What?" "What does

she mean?" "What did she say?" reverberated through the room.

Rita's heart started to pound painfully in her chest. She was finally going to get the explanation she urgently wanted.

"Knowing," the contessa went on, "that some of you are a little, shall we say, improvident, I took the liberty of using the profits from the sale of your heirlooms to invest in an annuity for each of you so you'd have some income in your sunset years.

"Frank Giordano did the investing for me and made some very wise choices. We kept what we were doing secret because we didn't want to hurt your pride. But certain misunderstandings have arisen"—the contessa glanced significantly at Rita, who wanted to hide from shame and embarrassment—"so I thought I'd better make this announcement tonight."

There was a stunned silence in the room, and Rita could see people trying to take in these amazing facts. Then a long, hearty cheer went up. Someone started a cheer of "*brava, bravissima*" for the contessa. Then the guests crowded around the beautiful old woman to thank her.

Rita anxiously waited her turn, feeling as if she had just made the most terrible mistake in her life. She was furious with herself for having jumped to all the wrong conclusions.

When she came up to the contessa, she took the outstretched hand and looked directly into the now-serene blue eyes.

"I think what you did was wonderful," Rita said with heart-felt emotion. "Please forgive me for not trusting you. It was very stupid of me."

The contessa's eyes twinkled affectionately at Rita once more. "You're young, my dear. It's a marvelous excuse. Use it as long as you can."

Rita could only nod dumbly, overwhelmed by the older woman's generosity

of spirit.

"Here's Frank," the contessa said softly.

How could she face him? Rita wondered, this man beaming so tenderly, so lovingly at her?

But when he laid his hand on her bare arm and said, "Let's leave this wild party and get some fresh air," she went as easily as if she were already flowing into his arms.

When they were outside the palazzo, Rita turned and faced him. "Oh Frank, I'm so sorry. More than sorry, I'm ashamed."

Frank put one finger under her chin and raised her head. "You shouldn't be, *cara*. The contessa's and my activities were suspicious-looking. But I couldn't give you an explanation without the contessa's permission."

"And the secret trip to Rome was...?"

"Yes, some business about the annuities."

"I'm terribly proud of you. I think it's wonderful that you have financial acumen as well as great artistic talent." Her voice became small and a little embarrassed. "I guess I just like achievers."

Frank threw his head back and roared with laughter. "You're an ambitious, strong-willed, success-worshipping woman, and I'm crazy about you."

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked with false demureness.

He grinned, that lopsided, nonchalant grin that never failed to make her heart keel over. He took her in his arms and she felt the familiar thrilling touch of his hand on her bare back as he buried his face in her hair.

"You'll stay in Venice now, won't you, *cara*?" he asked.

"Yes, I can stay as long as I want if I let my partner know."

"We'll have a real Italian wedding," Frank said with enthusiasm. "Music,

dancing, tons of pasta. We'll invite everybody—the contessa, the Morosini sisters, Luigi, Alfredo."

She looked up at him with laughing green eyes. "I adore big Italian weddings."

"What would you say to a honeymoon on Capri?" Frank asked.

Rita sighed. "Sounds lovely."

"And afterward?"

"We're going to live happily ever after."

Frank grinned. "I know, but where? Your city or mine?"

Rita put her head back on his broad shoulder and leaned into the arm he put around her waist. "Give me some ideas, darling."

"You've got valuable contacts here," Frank pointed out. "What would you say to opening a Venice branch of your antique business and leaving your partner to run the shop on Madison Avenue?"

"I've been thinking the same thing, Frank. I love Burano and Venice. I'll start making the arrangements right away."

His lips came down on hers to tell her again, wordlessly, how very much he loved her.

They wandered around Venice all night, arm in arm, in a state of ecstasy. They hired a gondola and made the round of the smaller canals blissfully aware of each other's presence and of the romantic beauty of the city which had witnessed the birth and flowering of their love. Eventually, they took the vaporetto back to Burano. By then, the sky was aflame with rosy streaks as delicate as a flamingo's wing.

Once inside the bedroom, his lips passionately fastened on hers, Frank scooped Rita up in his arms and carried her to the French window that opened out onto a balcony.

"There it is, *cara mia*. The sun rising over Venice, as we saw it on the first day

we loved each other."

"The beginning of our lives together," she murmured, twining her arms tightly about his neck.

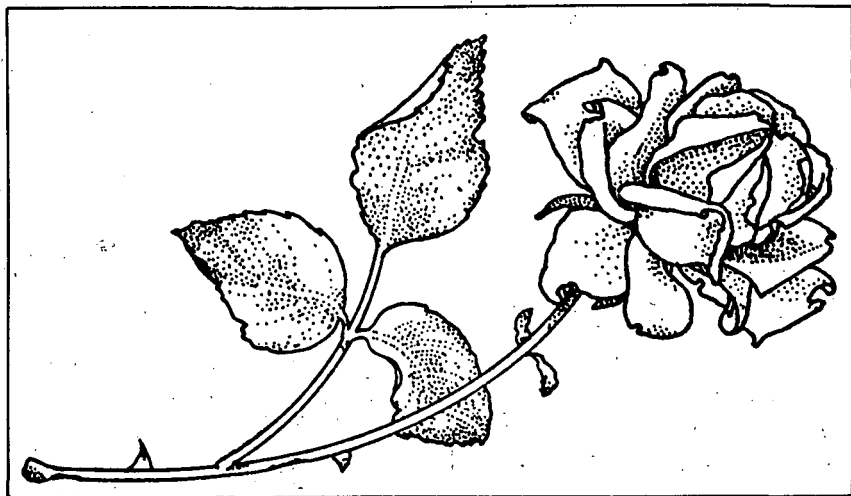
Frank looked down at her tenderly. "I will love you forever, Rita. I promise."

"Forever, my darling. A forever of love."

His kiss blended passion and

tenderness, ending only when the sun was a great golden orb gilding the Venetian lagoon.

Then he carried her to the bed, where they renewed their vows of "always." And Rita knew as she started the slow ascent to rapture that she trusted this man completely, that nothing could ever make her doubt him again. ♥



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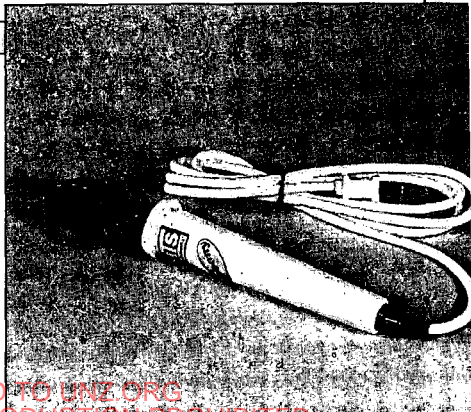
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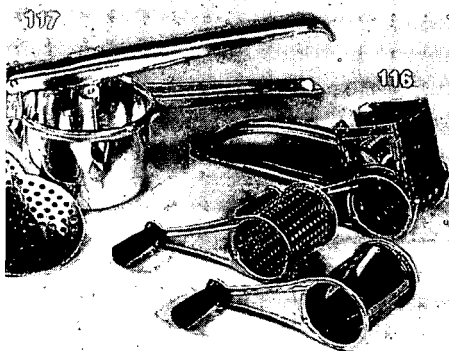
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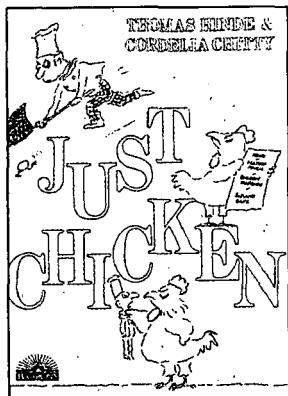
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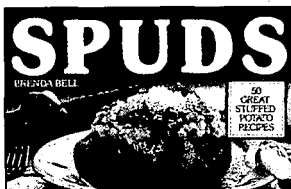
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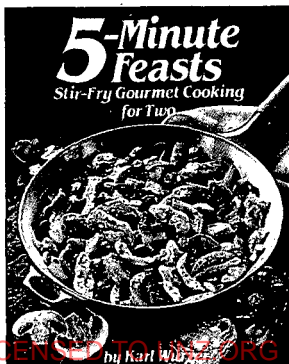
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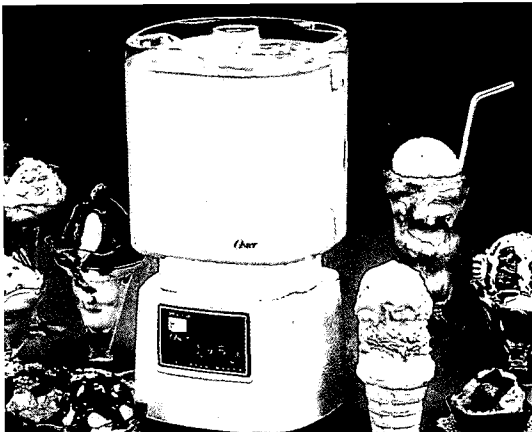


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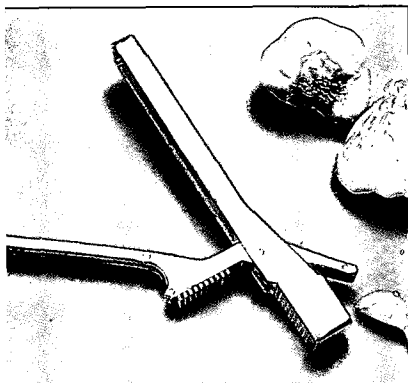
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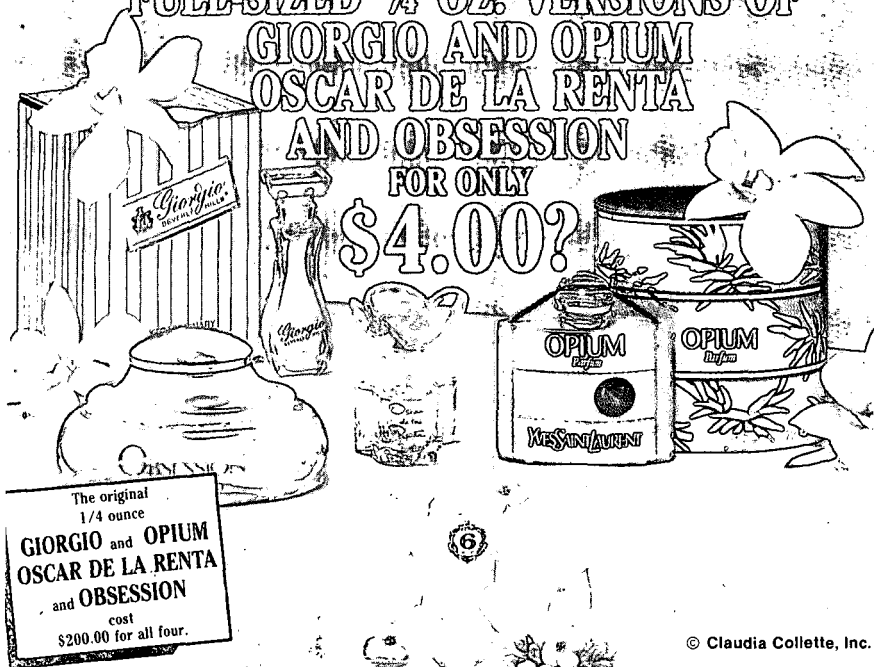


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